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CARLETON GRANGE.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "ABBOT'S CLEVE."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CARLETON GRANGE.

CHAPTER I.

QUEM DEUS.

IT is still the dead of night in Linchester, and the deserted thoroughfares lie hushed under the unpaled light of myriads of stars, when the private door of the house popularly known as "Walford's" is softly opened, and a man cautiously puts out his head, looking first up, then down, the street. No sign or sound of life is there, and after an instant's pause he comes forth, closing the door gently behind him. On first finding himself in the open air he makes two or three uncertain, almost staggering, steps, as one whose brain is giddy and confused, but recovers immediately, and sets off at a quick walk down the street in the direction of the railway station. A gas-lamp is burning a little further on; as he draws near, the rays fall upon his face, and show the pale features to be those of Francis Godfrey.

They are very pale to-night, and no wonder. For as he posts on his way a ghastly picture is dwelling in his mind's eye, the contemplation of which is like to freeze the marrow of his bones, but which yet will not let itself be blotted out. Above him the tranquil stars shine coldly down upon the earth; at his right hand and his left extend a series of modern shop-fronts closely shuttered, each surmounted by a towering pile of old-fashioned, quaintly gabled architecture; below him an uneven pavement echoes to the sound of a rapid yet stealthy tread; but none of his present surroundings are half so real and tangible to him as a certain thing which he remembers to have left behind him at Walford's. He cannot by any means thrust this thing from his thoughts; cannot forget how he saw it lying on the floor in a dusky motionless heap; how he had to step across it before he could reach the corner where, as he knew, the treasures of the bank were stored, taking care as he did so to avoid the place where a long dark streak slowly crept away from it along the floor; how, in coming forth from the corner with his spoil, he had to cross it again, with yet more heed this time to keep clear of that gradually elongating line. This is what he has left behind him at Walford's, and not even the consciousness of all he has brought thence can help him to forget it.

Rather in mechanical obedience to a predetermined plan than by the help of any reasoning faculties still remaining to him, did Francis Godfrey, with the vision of the bank parlour before his eyes, hold on his way through the sleeping streets of Linchester towards the railway station. As he neared it, a few appearances of life began to show themselves. One or two flys rattled past him into the station; three or four pedestrians, evidently on their way thither, he overtook. The night train for London was timed to stop at Linchester a few minutes hence, and the town, however provincial and old-fashioned in its ways, was still large enough to make it impossible for such an event to take place without creating more or less commotion in the neighbourhood of the scene of action. But to find himself once more in the sight and hearing of his fellow-creatures brought no relief to the man who had left that thing behind him in the parlour at Walford's. He had been cursing the death-like solitude about him only a few minutes before, but now he longed for nothing so much as to have it restored. For he felt as though everybody he came near must divine something of what had happened in the bank parlour; and every voice he heard made his blood run cold with terror lest it should be about to denounce him as a murderer.

He had nearly turned back from the building without entering, so strong was his apprehensive sense that none could look at him without suspecting what he had done, so intense his fear of the vengeance that would follow on such suspicion. But reason told him that whatever danger there might be in travelling from Linchester that night would be tenfold outweighed by the danger of being found in the neighbourhood on the morrow, and he entered. He must get away from Linchester if the road lay through the gates of hell itself.

The scene he found inside presented a strange contrast to that which he remembered within those same walls a few hours before, when the place was crowded with a bustling multitude of arriving and departing travellers. Now there were not more than some ten or dozen persons there in all, including porters and other functionaries; and when he crossed the threshold into the large square entrance-hall lighted with gas (how preternaturally bright that gas burned!) he felt as though never in his life had he been in a railway station under circumstances in which an individual passenger was so likely to attract attention. The very officials seemed to have nothing to do but to stare at a new-comer. No sooner had he entered than one of them came to ask him if he was for

London—how the man's voice made him start!—and to point out the ticket-distributor's office.

He was furnished with his ticket at last, after what seemed an almost interminable delay, for he had to receive some change which the man was slow in counting out and he was still slower in taking up (he hoped nobody noticed how his fingers trembled), and he went out to the platform to await the arrival of the train. But he had not been long here before he felt himself more conspicuous than ever. What could those people sitting staidly by the platform wall, that porter lazily leaning against one of the wooden supports of the roof —what could they think of him when they saw how impatiently he drummed on the floor with his foot, how eagerly he gazed into the black yawning tunnel from which the coming train was to emerge? must they not necessarily suspect that something was wrong? And then he put a great constraint on himself, and looked away from the tunnel, and ceased drumming with his foot, and even tried what he could do in the way of whistling. But he caught the porter's eye turned in his direction, and remembered that, after all, people who are waiting for trains are generally more or less impatient; he would only be the more remarked if he pretended to be too indifferent. So he looked at his watch, and then at the station-clock, and then

at the porter again. He found the man's face was still turned towards him, and it occurred to him that perhaps it would seem strange if he did not speak, and ask when the train was expected. He knew his policy was to avoid everything that seemed strange, and accordingly forced himself to say:

"We shan't have to wait much longer, I suppose?"

He was sorry now that he had spoken. His voice sounded so hoarse and hollow—in his own ears at least—that he felt sure it must have excited the attention of everybody present.

"Not half-a-minute, sir," said the porter, rousing himself—then the man had not expected to be accosted after all. "Halloo! here she is."

A long muffled whistle came out of the darkness of the tunnel, and immediately a rush took place among those on the platform. Foremost among them was Francis Godfrey, and hardly had the train stopped when he found himself making his way into a carriage over the outstretched legs of an old gentleman sleeping in the corner.

"Allow me," said the old gentleman, suddenly awakening. "There's a hat-box here I'll trouble you not to sit upon . . . . All right now, sir, all right."

The hat-box was put out of the way under the

seat, and the old gentleman, thus roused, seemed disposed to enter into conversation.

"Fine night for travelling. Going far, sir?"

Francis muttered something about London; he was in no mood for talking, and wished the old gentleman at the bottom of the sea.

"London, ah! so much the better; I'm going to London myself. Wonderful days these are for travelling, ain't they? Steam, steam, nothing like steam. Why, I remember the time when it took the best part of four-and-twenty hours to get from these parts up to London. They may well talk of changes, sir."

Francis said nothing; he was fuming with impatience to leave the Linchester platform behind him. But the old gentleman was not easily discouraged.

"And my father—he used always to be telling me how he saw four men hung at Linchester for stopping the King's mail. They wouldn't find it quite such easy work now, would they? ha! ha!"

What did the old fool mean by talking about hanging? Thus Francis thought to himself, but he still said nothing; and all attempts to draw the new-comer into conversation having failed, and the other occupants of the carriage being either

asleep or ensconced in remote corners, the old gentleman relapsed into silence, and prepared himself to resume his interrupted slumbers. Scarcely had he done so when the train began slowly to move from the platform, and Francis knew that he had at last left Linchester behind him.

It was wonderful the relief which it brought him to find himself on his way. The vision of the dusky heap left in the bank parlour grew gradually fainter with every revolution of the wheels which carried him away from the reality, while the all-pervading sense of personal danger which had overwhelmed him in the station at Linchester almost disappeared when he found that he had been suffered to leave it unmolested. He thought of the fears which had beset him while he stood on the platform, and almost wondered at his own cowardice. Were not these railway porters and guards constantly engaged all their lives long in facilitating the comings and goings of travellers? and what could be more ridiculous than to fancy that any individual passenger, so long as he produced his ticket and did not infringe any of the company's by-laws, was likely to be more particularly noticed than the rest? A gentleman departing for London by the night train—what occurrence in the eyes of such men could be more absolutely

commonplace than this? And supposing he had been specially observed—sufficiently observed to be identified on oath after the lapse of a few days or weeks—what then? He had been to Linchester that day to pay a visit to his friend Mr. Fleming; he had been too late for the train which left early in the evening; and it followed as a matter of course that he travelled by the one which started next. It was not because he had parted from Mr. Fleming several hours before he had been able to start from Linchester that it could occur to any one to suspect that he had spent the principal portion of the interval, not strolling about the streets, but lurking in a certain upstairs room at Walford's. Nothing could be made of such a simple fact as that of his being found at the Linchester station a few hours after he had been last seen with Mr. Fleming; and he defied them to find any other that could in the remotest way connect him with what the morning light would show them in the bank parlour.

How neatly and dexterously the whole thing had been managed!—as the train bore him further and further away from Linchester, he could not help thinking thus with some complacency. Complacency—yes, positive complacency The work of that night had been horrible—most horrible—so horrible that the mere recollection of it

seemed to congeal his blood; but, such as it was, it had been well and deftly done, and even while he shuddered he could not but regard it with a certain sense of workmanlike triumph. At a few hours' notice, alone and unaided, he, a new beginner, had done a stroke of business such as the most experienced hands are wont to take days or weeks to prepare for, and done it too in a style the perfection of which they seldom or never attain. No inconsequence of design, no bungling of execution, no loose ends left straggling, after the manner of inferior artists—those poor devils of highwaymen, for instance—which justice has but to lay her finger on that the whole web may be unravelled. Behold the advantages of intellect and culture. Where an ignorant clodhopping malefactor of the Bill Sykes class spends weeks in the elaboration of a clumsy complicated scheme which must infallibly at some point break down, leans on confederates who are as likely as not to turn Queen's evidence, and finally, when the time for performance comes, loses presence of mind and commits some oversight inevitably leading to detection, he, Francis Godfrey, had formed his plans almost impromptu, trusted exclusively to his own boldness and ingenuity for their successful execution, and, as a natural consequence, trusted not in vain. Only once had his nerve faltered—in that

accursed station, where for the first time he had met other men in his new character; but even then, though he had been weak, shamefully weak, he had not allowed his weakness to betray itself in his demeanour. That old gentleman in the corner might have thought him odd perhaps, but nothing more than odd; and even this impression he would take care to remove the next time there appeared a disposition to talk among his fellow-passengers. They should acknowledge him as the life of the party long before the train reached London.

His spirits were rapidly rising now, and he was so far able to rouse himself as to look about him and exercise his powers of observation in finding out what manner of people these fellow-passengers were whom he had thus resolved to conciliate. The old gentleman by his side was once more fast asleep, with a coloured handkerchief over his head to keep off the draught, so that it was manifestly out of the question to get up a conversation with him for the present. In the corner opposite sat, or rather reclined, a stout comfortable-sized woman looking like the mistress of an inn or prosperous eating-house—Francis was travelling second-class to-night, judging that he might thus hope to be less easily identified—and holding in her slumbering hands an enormous cotton umbrella which had

nearly slipped from their grasp. In a third corner reposed a man with a huge blue bag by his side, evidently a lawyer's clerk or commercial traveller; and opposite to him again sat a young gentleman just emerging from his teens, who, apparently despising the idea of going to sleep, was pursuing the more dignified occupation of rubbing his nose with the ivory handle of a spruce little bamboo cane.

A convulsive start ran through Francis Godfrey's frame, and with quick spasmodic movement he felt on the seat beside him with both hands, searching for something he had suddenly missed. Where was his own cane—the dandified little instrument he had carried so jauntily in the morning? But even as he searched, he knew the search was vain; he remembered how he had laid it down as he sat waiting and planning in that upstairs room at Walford's.

A cold clammy sweat burst from his every pore, and stood in large bead-like drops on his forehead. So he had left a trail behind him after all—a proof of guilt as damning as a signed and sealed confession. Where was his boasting now—where his self-glorifying contempt for criminals of coarser clay? The meanest wretch of them all could not have done his work more bunglingly than this; the brawniest of necks could not have been jeopardised by crasser oversight. Did intellect and

culture go for nothing then, or was there a fatality about these things—a fatality which rules that the shedders of blood shall never play their game with clear head and steady hand?

There was no chance of his guilt remaining a secret now—it was virtually unveiled already; no chance but that a hue and cry would be raised after him as after some noxious animal. His only resource was that by which the noxious animal seeks to save itself—flight—flight speedy and immediate. No renewal of the pleasures of London life for him now; no return to the old scenes and experiences which he had imagined his newly acquired wealth would enable him to enjoy with yet more than the old zest. He must fly the country before the tidings of his guilt could be generally known, and stow himself with his now comparatively useless spoils in some remote and obscure hiding-place—the more remote and obscure the better. He had the start of his pursuers at all events; that at least was an advantage which could not be taken away from him now.

Could it not? His heart turned cold within him, for he suddenly recollected that it could. He remembered that there was an agency yet more swift than the great steam power which excited the admiration of the old gentleman in

the corner—an agency by which justice, no longer halt and slow-footed, had before now been enabled to outstrip guilt even flying as fast as he fled that night. What if it should be so with him? what if even now he was rushing upon his fate? And then a whole series of fearful imaginings coursed through his brain, turning him sick and faint with terror. He had hitherto taken for granted that what he had done would remain undiscovered till the morning; but what security had he that it would indeed be so? Suppose the bank porter, who, as he knew from what he had overheard of Mr. Fleming's arrangements for that night, slept in one of the upper rooms—suppose he had been disturbed by the closing of the street door, or had awakened earlier than his wont, wondering why he was not called down to make all secure as usual; suppose he had come downstairs to the back parlour, and seen what he would see there! An instant alarm would be raised of course; the house would be searched, that hateful bauble found where he had left it in the room upstairs, and then . . . . . Perhaps even at that moment the message was flashing past which should prepare his doom; ay, perhaps already they waited for him at his journey's end, and laughed to think how they had trapped him.

"Thetbury, Thetbury—any one for Thetbury?" Thus were his musings suddenly disturbed, and looking up he found the train in the act of coming to a halt—the first it had made since leaving Linchester—and the guard's head peering in at the window.

"No," testily answered the old gentleman in the corner, startled from his slumbers by the shrill trenchant tones. "What the devil" . . .

The guard's head had passed away, and the old gentleman was delivering himself of some very choleric remarks on the frivolous and vexatious nature of the interruption, when Francis Godfrey sprang to his feet, and, rushing impetuously to the window, shouted after the man:

"Yes, yes, I get out here. Open the door."

A porter came to his assistance as he was rattling impatiently at the handle, and he bounded on to the platform, leaving the old gentleman in high dudgeon at the disregard of his shins involved in so sudden and unceremonious an exit.

No sooner had he touched the ground than he began to doubt the wisdom of his course. But what would be thought of him if he retracted now? Dizzy and bewildered, he staggered forward to an open door over which the words "Way Out" were inscribed in large letters.

Here he was delayed by having to give up his ticket to a functionary posted to receive it.

"Why, your ticket's for London, sir!" remarked the man, looking at the eccentric passenger with evident surprise.

"I—I have changed my mind," muttered Francis, as he passed on. Fool that he had been to change it! fool that he had been to encounter that surprised look! But the blunder was made past recall, and he must take the consequences.

He was out of the station now, and found himself in a lonely country road, with a long monotonous line of hedge-row on each side, on which the grey of the morning twilight was just breaking. He stood for an instant uncertain which way to turn, made his choice by haphazard, and set forth. As he did so, a shrill whistle sounded hard by, followed by the rumble of a departing train, and he cursed his folly ten times over. He was not yet twenty miles from Linchester, and yonder, booming fainter and ever fainter in his ears, rushed on the wheels upon whose speed—now no longer enlisted in his service—his best hope of safety had depended.

CHAPTER II.

NEXT MORNING.

IT was nearly eight o'clock in the morning, and the summer sun was standing high in the sky, when Mrs. Badgett, the elderly female who in Mr. Fleming's modest establishment officiated as cook, housekeeper, and maid-of-all-work rolled into one, was startled by a loud knock at the street door, followed, before she had time to answer it, by another and a louder. An easy temper was not an item in the long list of Mrs. Badgett's excellences, and she hurried to the door in high wrath and indignation against the person on the other side of it. But, ready as her tongue was, it was anticipated by that of the impatient summoner without.

"Mr. Fleming—where's Mr. Fleming? I must see him at once—this minute."

The speaker was the usually majestic and impassive Grimble, in a breathless state of flurry and excitement.

"Then you just can't," said Mrs. Badgett, not without a certain grim satisfaction in her tones. "Mr. Fleming had his breakfast an hour ago, and went out for the day directly after. It'll be the most he'll do if he comes home to sleep to-night. And another time, Mr. Grimble, I'll trouble you to knock a little more like a Christian man and not quite so much like a chimney afire, which if I hadn't knowed it was swep only last week I should have thought nothing less but what it was the fire-escape come to burn me in my bed. A pretty thing indeed that . . . . Lawk, Mr. Grimble, what ever is the matter?"

She had been too full at first of her grievance to notice anything unwonted in Grimble's manner or appearance, but all at once it struck her from his looks that something must be wrong.

Grimble made an effort to speak, but only succeeded in producing a sound midway between a gasp and a groan; his emotions were for the moment too mighty for utterance.

"Goodness gracious me!" cried Mrs. Badgett, her feminine sympathies fairly roused by this unaccustomed display of feeling. "Why, Mr. Grimble, you're trembling like an asp. It's nothing very bad, I hope? The children is well, and so is Mrs. Grimble?"

He nodded his head feebly. "Worse than that," was all he could articulate.

"Worse than that! Oh! Mr. Grimble, what is it?"

He gulped down a rising groan. "A robbery," he murmured hoarsely.

"A robbery! My heart alive! Where?"

The manly bosom of Grimble heaved spasmodically.

"There," he brought out at last, and nodded his head in the direction of the bank.

"At your place! Laws a mercy! Now don't give way, Mr. Grimble, don't, there's a good soul. How did it happen?"

Apparently Mrs. Badgett's sympathy did him good, for he mastered his feelings sufficiently to answer, with more volubility than was usual with him, though in a choking voice:

"That's just what none on us can tell. All I know is we was abed rather later nor usual this morning, and I was a going down in a great scramble to get the breakfast things ready for Mrs. G., when I seed the door of Mr. Fleming's room open, with the lamp alight inside. I thought I should have dropped nearly, but it was nothing to the turn I got the next minute when I looked in, for there was the safe a standing wide open, and the books and papers that to my certain knowledge is worth any money almost knocking about anyhow as if they was so much dirt, and

a little box stuffed with cotton, like what they keep jewellery in, lying with its lid wrenched off on the floor; and as if that wasn't enough, poor Mr. Bates—our second clerk, that is—stretched out afore my eyes with the bank's own gun what's kep in Mr. Walford's room atop of him, a stark stiff murdered corpse" . . . .

"Murdered!" ejaculated Mrs. Badgett, holding up her hands in horror — "you don't mean to tell me there's been a murder, Mr. Grimble?"

"Yes, murder and robbery," replied Grimble, wringing his hands—"robbery and murder. Oh! little did I ever think of living to talk of a robbery at Walford's."

"Step inside and tell us all about it while you rest a bit. You look ready to drop, poor dear!"

"I can't stop. Mr. Walford will be almost there by this time—there was some one sent to his house on horseback to tell him. He will be fit to go mad when he hears of it, I know. And Mr. Fleming—what ever shall we do with Mr. Fleming away? He's the only one who could do Mr. Walford a bit of good. What shall we all come to? Only to think of Walford's being robbed!"

"And murdered, Mr. Grimble—murdered—only to think indeed! It's as if a pail of cold

water was being poured right down my back. Was he quite stiff when you found him ?"

"Well, he isn't exactly dead, you know, that is to say, not dead outright."

"Not dead, Mr. Grimble! Why then, it isn't a murder after all." A shade crossed Mrs. Badgett's face which a calumniator might have set down to disappointment.

"Not yet altogether, but it will be. They were a taking of him to the hospital as I left —the doctor says he'll never speak again. A robbery at Walford's—a robbery at Walford's—who would have ever thought of a robbery at Walford's!"

With this dismal refrain on his lips and a mournful shake of his head, Grimble turned slowly from the door, while Mrs. Badgett called after him :

"Tell Mrs. Grimble I'm coming presently. She'll want a friend to cheer her up, poor lamb."

The door was shut, and Mrs. Badgett, bursting with curiosity to know all that was to be known, flew upstairs to equip herself for her visit, while Grimble pursued his solitary way back to the bank, wondering what Mr. Walford would say.

Grimble had not been far wrong in his anticipations of what the effect of the news would be on his chief. Mr. Walford's feelings were not fine

or susceptible, but they were strong when once roused, and an injury done to his pecuniary interests was the thing of all others to rouse them. On hearing that there had been a robbery, he came to the bank in a condition of furious excitement rendering him almost incapable of listening to reason. This was inflamed to its highest pitch when he had examined the scene of the previous night's crime, and found that, besides an unknown quantity of jewellery deposited by a customer, a very considerable sum of money belonging to the bank was also missing. Nor was it only the loss, large as it was, that affected him. In the wild unreasoning agitation into which it had thrown him, he was naturally apt to exaggerate the effect which the first rumours of the robbery might produce on the credit of the bank, and was ready to regard himself as utterly undone. Add to this his impotent chafing wrath at the absence of all discovered clue to the identity or whereabout of the criminal, and nothing was wanting to work him up to absolute frenzy.

"They shall pay for it, damn them, they shall pay for it," he exclaimed violently, quite regardless who should witness his excitement, as, flushed and breathless with the recollection of what he had just seen, he came out of Mr. Fleming's parlour into the public room in front. "They

shall find they have not ruined me for nothing—thank Heaven, there is law left for murderers yet."

It is to be feared that at this moment Mr. Walford's strongest feeling in reference to Bob was one of satisfaction in the idea that, by taking the poor clerk's life the criminal or criminals had incurred the highest penalty of the law.

"Ruined you! ha! ha! ha! very good. But excuse me, my dear sir, this is really no time for jesting," said a brisk-looking, bright-eyed little man at Mr. Walford's side, with a quick glance of apprehension round the room. And indeed the little man, being a lawyer, might well be shocked at Mr. Walford's indiscreet vehemence, for the place, although banking hours had not yet commenced, was nevertheless full of strangers. Of course everybody who had the remotest pretext for making his or her way into the house, in any capacity official or unofficial, had not failed to profit by it; and the consequence was that the public room contained a motley group, made up of constables and constables' friends, bank customers whom it would not do to offend by sending them about their business, distant acquaintances of Mr. Walford, and sundry others, not forgetting Mrs. Badgett and a few more sympathisers of the Grimble family.

"Let us be deliberate, Mr. Walford, deliberate—there's nothing like it at these times," proceeded the little man, who, as Mr. Walford's friend and lawyer, considered himself entitled to take the lead in the present crisis.

"Deliberate!" shouted the banker, foaming with passion. "Deliberate, while robbers and murderers are going about the world scot-free!"

"Yes, for that very reason, my dear sir. Slow and sure—that's the way to catch them, and catch them we will, as safe as my name's Puddicombe."

Mr. Walford grew somewhat calmer at this, and allowed himself to be edged unresisting into a remote corner of the room, held all the while tightly by the button.

"Be cool and think a bit," said Mr. Puddicombe coaxingly. "Now supposing"—here he dropped his voice—"supposing you had been told beforehand that such a thing was going to happen, is there nobody you would have been on your guard against?"

"Do you think I'm a fool?" interrupted the other testily. "I'd have been on my guard against all the world."

"Quite right too, my dear sir, quite right. But what I meant was—is there nobody you

would have put under special watch and supervision? For instance" . . . .

Mr. Puddicombe's voice sank into a whisper so low as to be hardly audible even to the person for whose ear it was intended; but Mr. Walford caught enough of it to understand that it insinuated a suggestion injurious to the honoured name of Grimble (where will the suspicion of a lawyer stop?) and shook his head decisively.

"Stuff and nonsense! You would as soon make me think it was me or my partner. If you can't say anything more to the point than that, say nothing."

Mr. Walford was not a man so heroically proof against all proneness to unworthy suspicion as this magnanimous answer might indicate; but he was a stubborn man, and for twenty years Grimble had been his special favourite and *protégé*.

Mr. Puddicombe saw that he would give offence if he persisted further in this line, and hastened to shift his ground.

"A mere suggestion, you know, a mere suggestion; we'll say no more about it. Come, Mr. Walford, have you no hypothesis of your own? Gently now; take time to consider, Let me see" —the little man pulled out his pocket-book, and looked askance at his client, holding himself ready to note down all answers — "that poor lad was

last seen alive and well last night at . . . . at what o'clock shall we say?"

"How the devil am I to know?" growled Mr. Walford. "You must find Fleming to ask him that—I've never been near the place since dinner-time yesterday. They shall hang for it, they shall hang for it, let them be who they may."

"With all my heart," assented Mr. Puddicombe. "But look here, my dear sir, look here. Mr. Fleming was the last on the premises, you say; then it is highly important, you perceive, that we should see Mr. Fleming to ask him" . . . .

"That's just the devil of it. Fleming's off—gone for the day, confound him—and left nothing but a trumpery note behind him which doesn't so much as tell me where he's off to. This is what comes of his neglecting his duty . . . . I shall go mad if we don't hang those villains."

"Gently, gently," said the little man soothingly. "But about Mr. Fleming going off so suddenly—that's rather unusual with him, isn't it?"

"Never knew it happen before," said Mr. Walford surlily.

"Indeed!" said the lawyer, and his sharp little eyes looked very sharp as he spoke. "And he doesn't say where he is going, you are sure of that?"

"If you don't choose to take my word for it, you can satisfy yourself," said the banker angrily, thrusting a crumpled bit of paper into Mr. Puddicombe's hand.

It was a mere memorandum, dated the previous evening, in which Mr. Fleming briefly told his partner that business of importance would oblige him to absent himself from the bank for the next day, but that he would certainly return in the course of the day following.

Mr. Puddicombe read the note through, turned it over to see if there was anything written on the other side, then turned it back again and read it through once more, and finally returned it to Mr. Walford, emitting a long low whistle as he did so.

"It is very strange, isn't it?" he said, while his bright eyes rested on Mr. Walford's face with a look of intent inquiry. But Mr. Walford was too much absorbed in his own troubles to notice the look, and replied only to the question.

"Strange! I think it will be the death of me. If somebody doesn't hang for this, I shall never get over it."

"It is a most unfortunate coincidence," said the lawyer. Again he looked at Mr. Walford and paused; but Mr. Walford remained silent, and the little man went on:

"Well, if we cannot have Mr. Fleming, we must do the best we can without him. You see what we want just now is to get a good grip of all the known facts, and then we can argue to the unknown afterwards. I may put down, then, that Mr. Fleming left that poor fellow alive and well last night — we don't like to take anything for granted in law, but this isn't exactly a court of justice — alive and well last night . . . . And here we come to the question again, at what o'clock? Do you happen to know at what o'clock, Mr. Walford?"

Mr. Walford shook his head sullenly; Mr. Puddicombe's method of procedure was in his eyes a sheer waste of time which he would not have tolerated for a moment if he could have suggested anything better.

"Does anybody here happen to know when Mr. Fleming came away from business last night?" asked Mr. Puddicombe, raising his voice and looking round the room.

There was a moment's pause, followed by a whispering of female voices. Presently there was a movement among a group of women clustered in the doorway, and Mrs. Badgett stood forth, all in a flutter of curtseys and agitation.

"Now then, my good woman, who are you?"

"I'm Mr. Fleming's housekeeper if you please,

gentlemen," said Mrs. Badgett, curtseying profusely "and have been for them ten months or more. Though little I thought once ever to have to go into service again, and shouldn't if poor Badgett had been altogether what he ought, which he was the best of 'usbands, gentlemen, and the kindest 'eart any woman could wish for, so be you could but catch him sober, as you was almost sure to on a Friday, being the day afore the wages was paid and the public 'ouse unwilling to give credit for all they knew him so well" . . . .

It was evident that Mrs. Badgett would never be able to come to the point if left to herself, and Mr. Puddicombe assisted her.

"Never mind that, my good woman. You are Mr. Fleming's housekeeper, you say. And I suppose you are going to tell us when Mr. Fleming came home last night?"

"Yes sir, please," said Mrs. Badgett, with another succession of curtseys. "Which I had the toothache dreadful bad all night, sir, being one which poor Badgett loosened and it's never been the same since, and I heard Mr. Fleming let himself in quite plain. I had been speaking about it to Betsy Hoggins only yesterday, which she and me was always friends and only natural, she being first cousin to Badgett's own sister's husband, and, says she, try Quackett's Balm of Mesopotamia. So

I bought a box coming home, and for certain sure it must be a wonderful good thing looking at the lots of people who write to say they never knowed anything like it, let alone a lord who signs his name with three stars" . . . .

"Bother!" said Mr. Puddicombe, losing all patience. "Do you know at what o'clock Mr. Fleming came in, or do you not?"

"Which is just what I'm telling you, sir," replied Mrs. Badgett with dignity. "Well, as I was a saying, I heard Mr. Fleming come in, and being in dreadful agony, thinks I to myself, I'll get up and put some on. Which I did, sir, and struck a light directly, and having took a look at the clock to see how many hours there was till morning, I put three drops on a bit of wadding just as they tell you in the directions" . . . .

"What o'clock was it?" thundered Mr. Puddicombe.

"A quarter past one," faltered Mrs. Badgett, startled into an instant answer by her interrogator's vehemence.

"A quarter past one. Then you may go down —stand aside I mean."

"I can't say as it did me a bit of good, sir," added Mrs. Badgett, who was unwilling to subside so soon into private life. But the lawyer had already turned his back upon her, and, finding it

vain to seek to attract his attention, she reluctantly retired to finish what she had to say in the midst of an admiring circle of female friends.

Meanwhile Mr. Puddicombe was complacently making an entry in his pocket-book.

"We shall be able to construct a beautiful theory of the case in time," he said triumphantly to Mr. Walford. "Here you see we have it for a fact that Mr. Fleming reached his house at a quarter past one; that is to say, presuming he went straight home, he left this at ten minutes past one at latest; that is to say, as we all know that what happened could not have taken place while he was on the premises . . . . did you speak, my dear sir?"

"No," said Mr. Walford impatiently. "I wish you'd come to the point and have done with it."

"That is to say, as we all know that what happened could not by any possibility have taken place while Mr. Fleming remained on the premises, the robbery and murderous assault must have been committed some time between ten minutes past one and the moment of discovery. Now to ascertain the exact moment of discovery, and we shall have made the most satisfactory progress towards narrowing the question. Narrow the question, sir, narrow the question," repeated the little man, smacking his lips over the words as

though he relished them, "that's the way to go to work. First clear the subject of all superfluous . . . . Halloo, what's up now?"

There was a hurried scuffling of footsteps in the passage, and the next moment Mrs. Grimble entered, making her way up to Mr. Walford in panting haste.

"This ain't yours, sir, is it? Because I found it upstairs in your room, and I know I never seed it afore."

She held up a natty little ivory-handled cane. As she did so, a loud shout was heard from the other side of the room, and Grimble rushed forward and glared at it with fiery eyes.

"So it's him, is it?" he exclaimed breathlessly. "I thought he was a queer 'un at the time, with his cut-away coat and his dandy airs. It's him, sure enough."

"Who?" roared Mr. Walford.

"The fellow as was with Mr. Fleming yesterday. I knowed he was no good by the looks of him and the way he swore at me when I said I didn't know if Mr. Fleming was in. I remember thinking I'd have liked to give him a switching with his own cane if it had been heavy enough."

"Who is it? where is he?" exclaimed Mr. Walford, almost livid with excitement.

"I remember — I remember — and when we

found he was gone we didn't know what had become of him. His card 's somewhere on Mr. Fleming's table, sir."

Grimble rushed into the next room, and rushed out again with a card, at which Mr. Walford snatched eagerly, and read the name of Francis Godfrey.

"I will find him if he is to be found alive," he shouted. "Justice, justice—I must and will have justice."

"The question certainly seems to be considerably narrowed," said Mr. Puddicombe thoughtfully. "You remember this man sufficiently to make out a description of him for the police and the railways and so on?" he asked Grimble.

"Remember him!" said Grimble, clenching his fist. "Oh yes! I remember him."

"The question is very much narrowed indeed," said the lawyer, turning to Mr. Walford. "Once find out who your criminal is, and it is a comparatively easy matter now-a-days to catch him."

"And by Heaven, he shall be caught," said Mr. Walford, bringing down his fist emphatically upon a desk by which he stood. "I have said I will have justice on him, and I will. I am not a man to give in when I am in earnest."

And Mr. Walford was terribly in earnest just now.

CHAPTER III.

IN FLIGHT.

ACROSS fields and meadows, through shady country lanes and dusty highways, he concerning whom they sought to know was meanwhile toiling on, nowhere finding rest, nowhere daring to seek it. The sun climbed higher and higher in the sky, warming all nature into the fulness of summer life, making the air vocal with the hum of insects and the song of birds, loading the passing breezes with the perfume of sweet flowers and rich vegetation. But none of these things gave pleasure to the man who was wandering among them now, with the stain of blood upon his soul. He would fain have followed the night if he could, and buried his face in her dark robe for ever. He knew that the deed he had done made him of her kingdom; and when he found himself with the memory of his guilt in the returning light of day, he felt exposed and helpless as may feel those

living waifs of ocean which, having their native home at the bottom of the sea, are left stranded by the retreating tide, loathing the air and the sunshine, and vainly longing for the friendly shelter of the covering waves.

Possibly this sense of guilty fear and shrinking might not have taken such absolute possession of him as it did but that he was faint with hunger and exhaustion. He had not touched food since the previous day; and, from the time he had quitted the train at Thetbury hours before, he had been on foot, impelled to constant unresting movement by a consuming terror of pursuit. Yet with all his exertions he was now barely five miles from Thetbury. In his exaggerated, self-stultifying eagerness to avoid observation, he had struck into a by-path which seemed to lead in the same direction as the high-road; and the consequence was that when, after hours of laborious walking during which he had been afraid of seeking information from the few country people he occasionally met, he ventured at last to make an inquiry, he found that he had gone miles out of his way. When with toil and difficulty he had regained the right road, he could not help remembering how once long ago he had been set to fill a copy-book page with repeated transcripts of the sentence, "Conscience makes cowards of us all;"

and he wondered whether, after all, there might not be something in copy-book morality.

It was a serious thing for him this useless expenditure of strength, to say nothing of the loss of time the mistake had involved, for on his physical strength depended his sole hope of escape. It was out of the question now—so at least reasoned his fears—to venture himself in any public conveyance; and on foot, if at all, he must make his way to his destination. This was no longer London—London was too far to be reached thus with any chance of safety—but Kingshaven, a large sea-port town some five-and-twenty miles from Linchester, where he thought that with good fortune he might succeed in shipping himself unchallenged in one of the merchant or passenger vessels which were constantly starting thence for all parts of the world. But though he had been comparatively near the place last night when he had come out of Walford's —so near that even on foot he might by this time have gained it—he was far from it now; far enough to make it a question whether he would be able to reach it before the close of the next day. For not only had the railway carried him nearly twenty miles in the opposite direction before he had begun his journey thither, but, since he dared not pass near Linchester on his way, he would be forced to make a round by which as many miles

more would be added to the road. Tired and half-famished, his limbs trembling under him from the effect of long hours already passed of mental excitement and bodily exertion, and such a journey still before him—here was a prospect at which it is no wonder if the self-indulgent man of pleasure quailed. He would have given in at once only that there was another prospect that made him quail yet more. When he thought of what it was from which he fled, a shuddering seized him which made everything he did or could endure seem tolerable, save only the chance of being hunted down.

But oh! his folly in leaving the train—his cowardly, accursed folly! How bitterly he remembered it as he wearily leaned against a stile by the lonely wayside—well-nigh his first resting-place since he had alighted at Thetbury in the pale morning twilight—and thought where he might have been by this if he had but persevered in his first plan of flight. The danger which had seemed so real last night, that the tidings of his crime should reach London before he did, looked less than nothing now, and he could only think how many more chances of safety he would have found there than here. Why, supposing he had reached London this morning, he might have been well-nigh out of the country already, or at the least

would have been lost to all pursuit, an undiscoverable unit among the masses of the most crowded population in the world. As he had sat in the railway carriage last night, it had seemed to him a matter of course that he must be captured instantly on his arrival at the London terminus; and this morning it seemed to him a matter of course that, if he had but gone on, it would have been beyond the power of the utmost ingenuity to trace him. Here everybody knew that he was a stranger, and noticed him accordingly, like that officious fellow of a waggoner who had touched his hat to him just now. Here everybody—from the inhabitants of the white country-houses that dotted the landscape to the hay-makers whom a while ago he would have liked to annihilate for singing at their work—would, if it could be suspected what he had done, regard him as a natural enemy. But there he might have wandered all day with none to turn their heads to look after him; there, if so minded, he might have fallen in with friends, men in whose society he would have been all the more welcome if it were known he was under the ban of justice. After all there were such men—it was pleasant to remember that, knowing how many there would be against him—and in London, if anywhere, they were to be found.

Fool that he had been—fool, fool! Had he not

been infatuated from the first—infatuated at the moment when a certain idea had crossed him listening in the little ante-chamber outside the bank parlour? infatuated as he sat maturing it in the lonely room upstairs? What treasure rich enough to pay him for feeling as he felt to-day, for suffering as he had suffered through the night? He thought of those diamonds he carried about him, and wondered if their sparkle was so bright as he had imagined. It might have been some comfort could he have looked to see, but though he longed, he dared not. What if some one should be lurking behind the hedge on the opposite side of the road, watching him through some unseen opening? The glittering trophies remained undisturbed, and instead of examining their lustre he let his eyes rest moodily on a certain solitary reddish-brown speck which to him was still visible through all the mud with which a night's walking had stained the hem of his trousers. A very small speck it was, looking among the neighbouring splashes of mud like a mere spot of red clay; but he knew it was something else than that, or why had all his rubbing failed to rub it out? And as he gazed down at it he shivered, and acknowledged to himself that he must have been mad yesterday.

And yet not perhaps so mad either. To be alone with his enemy, the man who, with name

and fame depending on his good-will, yet openly despised him, dealing with him as though he were a dangerous animal to be kept in check by firm voice and threatening eye, the man who yesterday had thwarted and defied him anew—to be alone with that proud enemy—at night, with none to step in between him and the victory to which his superior strength and vigour entitled him, a weapon in his hand . . . . Ay, for such a moment of triumph as that it would have been worth while to risk something. And then had he not calculated, and did it not seem plausible to imagine, that Mr. Fleming, taken by surprise and seeing himself conquered, might have been content to let his treasures go and avert the necessity of extreme measures? Not so mad indeed. How was he to know that there had been a change in the arrangements made in his hearing—that in Mr. Fleming's room, sitting alone to keep watch and ward over the riches of the bank, he was to find, not Mr. Fleming himself, but that young clerk? And on discovery of his mistake how was he to go back? what choice was left but to do the thing he had done? After all, he had not been mad—only unlucky—desperately unlucky. It would have gone very differently with him now if matters had fallen out as he had a right to expect that they would.

He roused himself with difficulty, and forced his stiffening limbs once more into motion. Onward! onward! the moments were too precious to be wasted in repose. Onward! in spite of aching sinews and reeling brain—onward, ever onward, for dear life's sake. For life was dear to him yet—dearer perhaps now that every moment of existence was torture than it had ever been before. He had heard of people who, being in straits surely not more desperate than his, had been driven in their misery to suicide, but such people were more a mystery to him now than ever. In the depths of his wretchedness he loved his life and clung to it as he had never clung to it yet, with a frantic tenacity that no corporeal suffering, no mental anguish, could wear out. Life, life, anything for the sake of life. What would become of him if he lost it?

But, with all his eagerness to press forward, he could not be insensible to the bodily wants that made themselves imperiously felt, to the gnawing pangs of hunger least of all. He had not dared to stop to buy food hitherto, so morbidly fearful was he of attracting observation; but he found that, risk or no risk, he could not delay much longer now. Yet even after he had decided that he must have food at all hazards, it was some time before he could bring himself to the point of seeking it

where he knew it was to be had. Once he was looking wistfully towards a snug little roadside hostelry—just the kind of place that five minutes before he would have been ready to give anything to have found near him—and had almost made up his mind to enter, when a stout jovial-faced man standing in the porch, apparently the landlord, called out cheerily:

"Here you are, sir. There is a prime juicy cut of steak inside that'll be done for you in no time You're ready for your dinner, I know; nothing like plenty of walking for the appetite."

Did he indeed look so travel-stained? What lynx-eyes the man must have! No, he would not enter there—let his need be what it might.

He shook his head and passed on, but felt as though he had never given up so much in his life as he gave up then.

He had to walk some miles further before another opportunity of obtaining nourishment presented itself, and by that time—it was already late in the afternoon—the calls of hunger had become so pressing that he could not have resisted them even had the same jovial-faced landlord appeared to welcome him. But this place was very different from the last. Instead of a comfortable inn, it was a shabby little village provision shop, in whose window a row of untempting loaves and

a few articles of yet more untempting confectionery vied for public patronage with a mound of sample potatoes, a basket of eggs, a bundle of unwholesome-looking sausages, and a canister purporting to contain strong black tea. They were not accustomed to give dinners to travellers here, much less to volunteer them; and it was some time before Francis could get the woman who came tardily forth from a back-room at his summons to understand that what he wanted was bread and cheese, or whatever other provisions she might chance to have by her that did not require cooking, with permission to eat them on the spot.

"As quick as you can, please, for I am amazingly hungry"—how strangely stiff and artificial the words sounded, though he had been studying the right accent to give them for the last hour! "And no wonder, for I am in the second week of a long walking tour."

He was not naturally communicative, and, had the fact been as he said, would never have troubled himself to publish it; but, as matters stood, he felt that everything about him must be so irresistibly suggestive of suspicion that some consistent-seeming explanation was absolutely necessary.

"Oh indeed, sir," said the woman, a red-cheeked, good-humoured-looking dame, while she

bustled actively about to supply her customer's wants. "Very pleasant, I dare say, especially in weather like this. A beautiful day it has been, sir, to be sure!"

Had it? He hardly knew whether it had or not, but he assented to the proposition of course.

A loaf, with cheese and butter, was placed before him, and he began to eat with as much relish as was compatible with a painful effort not to appear suspiciously hungry.

"I'm sorry I've nothing better to offer you, sir," said the woman. "You should have had a slice of ham if it had been to-morrow, but we happen to be just out of it at present. My husband is gone to Linchester to-day, and that's one of the things he is to bring back with him."

So that woman's husband was at Linchester, was he? And how full he would be of the news when he came home! Would it occur to the wife to divine who her somewhile customer had been?

"You have seen Linchester, I suppose, sir?" said the woman, by way of making conversation. "A very nice place is Linchester, for certain."

"Is it? I have never been there," he answered as carelessly as he could. Was it possible she was trying to entrap him? he asked himself, and a cold tremor ran through his heart.

"Haven't you really, sir? Why, nobody hardly comes this way without taking a look at Linchester. They have an old cathedral there which them as understands such things thinks a heap of, and the shops is worth anybody's while to see, pretty nigh equal to London, some of 'em. You must not leave them parts without a peep at Linchester, sir."

Must not? Had she any reason then to think that circumstances might arise under which he would be no longer a free agent? He felt a chill moisture suffuse itself over his brow, but he managed to blurt forth an answer:

"I don't care about old cathedrals, or fine shops either. I am not going out of my way to please anybody."

He spoke so surlily as to discourage his hostess from all further attempt at conversation, and he was left to finish his repast in silence. But all enjoyment of it was gone now, and even had it not been so, he would not have ventured to stay much longer. Suppose the woman's husband should return from Linchester with the news, and find him still sitting there! A few minutes more he remained for the sake of appearances, and then, having paid for his meal and providently stowed away what remained of it in his pockets, he left the shop, almost surprised to find

that no opposition was offered to his departure, and set himself once more on his dreary way.

Onward—ever onward—past cultivated fields and wild heath-lands, trim orchards and tangled woods, lordly country-houses and wayside hovels—onward, onward without halt or pause. The shadows gradually lengthened round him, but he took no note of them. Haymakers and labourers passed him returning from their work, but he thought not of rest for himself. The western sky began to fleck itself with red, but he slackened not his pace to regard it. The red died out and the grey mists of evening stole over the earth; but though he was glad that night had come again with her sheltering mantle, he dared not yet accept her invitation to repose—he must be a little further on the way to safety first.

The night had nearly fallen when he found himself entering the streets of what appeared to be a considerable town—the largest certainly that he had seen since leaving Linchester. He did not venture to ask what the place was, and contented himself with the conjecture that it was probably Wittingham—a populous town, ranking next to Linchester in the county, through or near which, as he knew, his way would lie. He had not yet recovered from the feeling he had first experienced the previous night on approaching

the Linchester station, of instinctive shrinking from the neighbourhood of his fellow-men, and quickened his pace that he might be able to leave the town behind him as soon as possible.

He had not gone far thus when, in what seemed to be one of the busiest thoroughfares of the place, he found his passage obstructed by a knot of people that blocked the pavement in front of a house of the lower part of which he could see nothing except that it was brilliantly lighted up with gas. He would have crossed the street to avoid them, but just then some heavy waggons were passing, and, impatient of all delay, he pressed his way into the crowd on the pavement, and attempted to push by. As he did so, he glanced towards the house before which the idlers were collected. It was a newspaper office, and the object of attraction was a huge placard in the window, setting forth, in some half-dozen of the short sentences called "sensation headings," the principal items of that day's news. A mist swam before his eyes, and his limbs nearly gave way under him. Not another step forward could he make, and, rooted to the spot, he stood gazing at the window before him. As the dizziness gradually left him, the first words he saw were:

"MURDER AND ROBBERY AT LINCHESTER."

He was not surprised. He had almost pictured to himself beforehand how the words would look. And yet to see them in actual black and white before him seemed to send his brain into a fierce confused whirl, and for a few seconds he was blind once more. He looked again presently, and then he read:

"Life of Victim Despaired of."

So the boy was not dead yet, after all—how dared they call it a murder then? He breathed a little less painfully at this, and for a moment his pulses beat more lightly. But the relief was only momentary, for he read on, and saw:

"Description of Murderer.

Two Hundred Pounds Reward."

He read no more. Weak and giddy as he was, he had still strength enough to be spurred into fresh activity by such words as these—words to his guilty understanding boding danger deadly and immediate; and, gathering new energy from the very intensity of his terror, he set himself to push his way out of the crowd. As he passed the door of the office, he was jostled by customers coming out with newly-bought copies of the paper sold within; evidently the establishment was doing a brisk trade that evening. He

would have given anything to have dared to buy one too; he was sick with anxiety to learn exactly what was known or suspected with reference to himself. But again his fears stood in his way; he would as soon walk into a lion's den as trust himself in yonder place, where they were actually selling a description of him. So he cast a glance inside, half of wistfulness, half of apprehension, and passed hurriedly on out of the flare of the blazing gas-lights.

He had not gone many steps when he was startled by hearing a shrill voice cry forth, almost close to his ear, the now familiar words:

"Murder and Robbery at Linchester."

He was not sure at first whether the words had actually been uttered, or whether imagination had deceived him by twisting some other sound into an echo of the phrase which at the time seemed to hold possession of his brain and all his senses; and he turned round, confused and affrighted. At that moment the words were repeated, and then he found that they proceeded from a lithe wiry little urchin, who looked into his face with twinkling black eyes that appeared almost impish in the light of a neighbouring street-lamp, and shouted at the top of his lungs:

"*Wittingham Herald* — one penny. Special Evening Edition with Murder and Robbery com-

plete, only one penny. Murder and Robbery—one penny only."

For an instant he glared at the boy with eyes that seemed almost starting from his head with mingled terror and fury — only deterred by the publicity of the spot from felling him to the earth as a mocking devil sent purposely to torment him. In the next, however, he understood how misplaced were alike his anger and his fear; the boy was only trying to sell the thing which he, Francis Godfrey, so ardently desired to buy—a copy of the paper containing the news from Linchester. He fumbled hastily in his pockets, found a penny which he thrust into the boy's hand, grasped eagerly at the sheet proffered in exchange, and hurried away with it as though it had been the most coveted of treasures.

He had to control his impatience some time longer before he could find a fitting opportunity of studying the news that so profoundly interested him. But at last, having left the busy part of the town behind him, he came to a solitary suburban road, in which, little used though it was, a few gas-lamps were burning for the convenience of the inhabitants of some half-dozen villas that skirted it. At the foot of one of these lamps he halted, and, drawing forth the paper, began to read:

"Murder and Robbery at Linchester"—these of

course were the first words that met his eye (how they seemed to haunt him everywhere!) printed in capitals a quarter of an inch long. Under them, in smaller type, followed a narrative of that which he had been picturing to himself all these hours past—the finding in the morning of the thing which he had left overnight a dark formless heap on the floor of the bank parlour (how grimly strange the familiar ideas looked tricked out with the penny-a-liner's fine writing!). Then came what had for him, if possible, a yet more terrible interest—an account of the further discovery made in the room upstairs and the surmises which it had suggested. So! he had not been wrong in foreseeing that that loathsome gewgaw would be the instrument of his undoing. Next followed a personal description—such a description as he had often read before appended to a tale of crime, only with the difference that in this instance he recognised a delineation of himself. And what an exact description it was! so minute, so accurate, that, as he read, he saw himself in every line. The whole concluded with a short paragraph divided from the rest by the separate heading of "Latest Particulars:"—

A telegram from Linchester received just before going to press informs us that the hapless victim in the diabolical transaction above alluded to is still lingering, though, as we

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need scarcely say, dissolution is momentarily anticipated, and probably may have already occurred by the time these lines reach the hands of our readers.

Why, then, perhaps it was happening now, at this moment. Would it make any difference to him when it was over? the murderer wondered, and he glanced round him nervously as though expecting to see an apparition. But nothing was there, and he returned to his reading.

We have great satisfaction in adding that there is substantial reason to hope for the speedy apprehension of the alleged criminal. For obvious reasons we forbear entering into details, but we may, we believe, confidently state that the police are understood to be sanguine. Their exertions will doubtless be materially facilitated by the circumstance that Mr. Walford, with his usual public spirit, has offered a reward of 200*l.* for the capture of the suspected individual—a reward which will probably be considerably augmented by the Home Office should the demise of the victim transpire before the efforts now making in the interests of justice are crowned with success. Affairs being in this posture, we cannot bring ourselves to doubt that in this case, as in so many others, will be verified the venerable adage, "Murder will out."

At another time and under other circumstances, all this stereotyped talk about the police being sanguine would simply have brought a contemptuous smile to his lip, while the venerable adage and its application would have made him laugh outright. As it was, he neither smiled nor laughed, but turned hot and cold with agonising

fear. His pursuers were on his track—he never thought of doubting that it was so. Murder will out—for the moment the phrase seemed to him to express the one law of the universe, infallible and immutable. A sense of utter despair crept over him, paralysing for a time all his muscles, and prompting him to cast himself down by the way-side and wait for the arrival of his captors rather than endure the torture of feeling himself gradually overtaken by them. What chance of safety was left to him now? indeed what chance had ever existed? He was so lonely, so helpless, so utterly unfriended. Others who did such deeds as he had done were wont to provide themselves with accomplices—confederates who smoothed the way of escape, and sought to throw justice on the wrong scent. But he was alone against all the world; for him no friendly hand to cover up the trail he left behind, none but vengeful enemies ravening for his life.

Stay, was there not one who might yet be made his ally—one whom he had at least the power of involving with him in a common ruin? His eyes flashed with renewed hope, and his relaxed nerves braced themselves for fresh efforts. No, he would not give way yet. A precious talisman was still left to him, a talisman which had done much for him already, and which might possibly now, in

this time of extremest need, open to him the way to safety—the talisman of his power over Gilbert Fleming. The idea had no sooner occurred to him than it was acted on, and, tearing off the blank fly-leaf of a letter he found in his pocket-book, he hurriedly pencilled the following words :—

Divert their suspicions if you can ; it is worth your while to try. If I am taken, I break silence at once ; revenge will be the only comfort left me, and you need not expect I will forego it.

But it was not enough to have written these lines ; he must put them in a directed envelope and post them to their destination. To do this it was necessary to return to the town he had just left ; and forthwith he began, though reluctantly, to retrace his steps till he came to a small stationer's shop situated in a back street. He paused a moment before he could make up his mind to enter, but eagerness to despatch his note gave him courage to confront risks from which he would have shrunk a few minutes before ; and moreover the light of the gas burning within showed that there was nobody in the shop save a middle-aged woman left in charge of the counter. He went in, and asked for an envelope, with pen and ink to write an address.

"Nice evening, sir," said the woman, when she

had handed him what he wanted, and stood waiting till he should have done writing.

He muttered an affirmative—what did people mean by always worrying him to talk?

"Dreadful news this is from Linchester, sir. You have heard of course?"

His hand shook so that he could scarcely hold the pen.

"News! what news?"

"Oh! such a shocking thing, sir—a murder and robbery. I haven't had time to read about it yet myself, but I know it must be something very horrible from the way people have been running after it all the evening. I think I've got one more *Herald* left, though, if you would like to have it, sir. Only one penny, and very interesting reading."

He dared not trust himself to answer; his lips were quivering so that he had no control over them. By this time his note was made up and directed, and, dashing down a shilling on the counter, he rushed out of the shop without waiting for change.

He dropped his letter into a receiving-box which he found a few doors further on, and with all the speed he could command hastened to make his way once more into the open country. He had just enough strength left to gain it, and then,

yielding at last to the exhaustion against which he had so long struggled, he turned staggering into a field by the wayside, and lay down under the shelter of a hedge to snatch a few hours of repose for his aching limbs, and, if possible, of oblivion for his tortured brain. And thus ended the first day of flight.

CHAPTER IV.

LADY ROSAMOND'S BOUDOIR.

VERY differently meantime that same day was closing for the inmates of a certain pleasant home in the North country, where, in a pretty, cheerfully lighted room, three ladies were sitting together, whiling away the last half-hour before bedtime. The room was Lady Rosamond's boudoir at Ilscote Lodge, and its occupants this evening were Lady Rosamond and her sister, with their guest Miss Travers, or Maud Fleming, who had now been living three or four days under their roof. Maud was seated at the piano, at which she had been executing several songs and pieces in compliance with the request of Lady Rosamond, who had never before heard her perform, and who, having discovered how good a musician her guest was, sat listening with such evident pleasure that Maud was only too glad to gratify her by going on. Nor was approbation wanting from Lady Blanche also, who, though perhaps not listening quite so

intently as her sister, was actually taking the trouble to look through a quantity of old music that she had collected in a heap on the table, with the hope of lighting on certain favourite airs of hers which Maud did not remember sufficiently to play by heart.

Maud was happy—happier than she had thought ever to be again. The last few days spent at Ilscote, in the company of Lady Rosamond, who had from the first exercised so powerful an attraction over her, and of Lady Blanche, who, if at times a little patronising, at least knew how to avoid wounding her feelings, had worked upon her like a charm. Then this evening the consciousness of giving pleasure to her kind friends, the enjoyment which after a while she herself found in the exercise of her long disused powers, the soft breath of the cool night air that came wafted through the open window, perhaps also some other cause which she could not have explained even to herself—all contributed to refresh and invigorate her spirits; and as she sat listening to the music made by her own voice and fingers, she looked and felt more like her old self than she had ever done since the night of her flight from Hernebridge.

"Oh! thank you, Miss Travers," graciously said Lady Blanche, as Maud rose at the conclusion of a song. "You are not quite tired out with your

exertions, I hope, for I have just found something I particularly want you to sing—an old song of Lady Rosamond's, which I used to be very fond of and have not heard for ages. Perhaps you don't know it, for it is an old-fashioned thing, as you see, but you will find it very easy, and I should say it will just do for your voice. Indeed I am sure it will; it suited my sister exactly, and your voice reminds me so very much of hers. Do you think you can manage it?"

Meanwhile Maud was looking over the sheet of music handed her by Lady Blanche, and recognised the air as an old favourite of her own, which had caught her fancy years ago when she heard it hummed by one of her schoolfellows, and which she had never forgotten since.

"I think I can. At least the air is quite familiar to me, though I have never been able to find any one who could tell me what it was. It has always seemed to me so very beautiful."

"Let me see what it is you both admire so much," said Lady Rosamond, taking the music from Maud's hand with a smile. But no sooner had she looked than the smile faded from her lips, and a visible tremor passed through her frame.

"Not that one," she said, laying the music hastily down. "Find something else, Blanche—anything but that."

Lady Blanche did not insist further. Both she and Maud understood that the song thus chosen must be painfully associated in Lady Rosamond's mind with recollections of her husband or child, and quietly rectified the blunder by fixing on another. When this was finished, and Maud once more rose from the piano, the clock on the chimney-piece struck eleven, the usual hour for retirement in the quiet household at the Lodge; and Lady Blanche, who was a model of punctuality in all her habits, folded up her work, and bid her sister and Maud good-night.

"I am much obliged to you for the pleasure you have been giving me this evening," she said, extending her hand with magnificent affability to Maud, who during the few days she had been at Ilscote had been making wonderful progress in her ladyship's good graces. "Rosamond, my dear, I hope you are not going to keep Miss Travers up any longer; I am sure she must be tired after all she has been doing for us this evening."

"We are going almost immediately," said Lady Rosamond. "Good-night, my dear Blanche."

Lady Blanche went away, and, with a strange sensation of peaceful pleasure creeping over her, Maud found herself alone with her friend. There was silence for a few seconds, and then Lady Rosamond turned to her and said:

"I have been asking you for a great deal this evening, I know, but there is one more favour I want you to do me. Will you oblige me by letting me hear this?"

And she put into Maud's hand the identical song which had been selected by Lady Blanche.

Maud was afraid that this request was prompted by an over-punctilious solicitude for her feelings, and attempted to excuse herself.

"But really I hardly know it. I never saw it before this evening. I had rather not sing it, indeed."

"To please me, Miss Travers," said Lady Rosamond, persisting. "I ask it from you as a favour."

Maud could not refuse longer, and, placing herself once more at the piano, began to sing. The song was a very simple one—a slight ballad set to a sweet unpretending melody—but to Maud, as she recognised the familiar air that for years past had ever and anon haunted her, and gradually entered into the spirit of the words to which she now for the first time found it joined, it sounded exquisitely beautiful. A soft tranquillising influence stole over her as she sang, soothing her soul with a sense of long-forgotten peace and joy, as though a ray of celestial light had been allowed to reach it from that far-away pre-natal past in which, as some have imagined, our spirits dwelt, happily

ignorant of pain and evil, before they were sent hither to be tested by the rough ordeal of earthly existence. Never before had she felt music as she felt this, and never before had she so thrown her heart into her voice as she threw it now, singing this simple old-fashioned ditty with Lady Rosamond for sole listener.

The last notes died plaintively away, and Maud let her hands fall dreamily from the keys, still so much under the influence of the music that she hardly noticed the absence of Lady Rosamond's usually ready expression of thanks or approbation. She roused herself in a few moments, and, rising from the piano, turned towards her friend. And now was explained the reason of the silence at which she began to wonder—Lady Rosamond was weeping.

She looked up at the rustle of Maud's dress, and took the handkerchief from her eyes.

"Forgive me—it is very foolish—after so many years. But that song—that song—I have never heard it since" . . . . She covered her eyes again, and her slender form was convulsed by a suppressed noiseless sob. "Not since I used to sing it every evening sitting by my little girl's bed till she fell asleep. And I loved her so—I loved her so! Oh! my child, my darling, how I loved her!"

"Lady Rosamond, dear Lady Rosamond!" murmured Maud, and, unable to refrain from giving expression to the sympathy which overflowed her heart, she ventured to take hold of the hand which hung heavily downward by the mourner's side. And the friendship thus proffered was not rejected; rather it was eagerly accepted, for no sooner had she touched it than the fingers closed round hers with a warm, almost clinging, pressure.

"And how I love her still, how I shall love her always! When I think of what she might have been to me now" . . . .

Her voice shook; she could say no more, and Maud felt the hand that held hers tremble.

"Dear Lady Rosamond!" said Maud again, speaking with difficulty through her own tears. "I am so sorry, so very sorry, to have caused you this pain."

Lady Rosamond pressed her hand once more. "No, no, it was my fault—all my fault. I thought, with nobody by but you and me, I should have been stronger, and I longed so much to hear that song again."

She paused for a few moments, struggling to regain composure, and presently went on with a faint smile:

"It is I who ought to apologise, Miss Travers. I asked you here that you might enjoy your-

self, and, instead of trying to enliven you, I am depressing you by an exhibition of my weakness. And I do so wish you to be happy in this house."

"Happy in this house! Oh! Lady Rosamond, you do not know how happy I am to be with you —happier than I have been since . . . . for a very long time."

These words, spoken in a voice which made it impossible to mistake them for mere compliment, seemed to give pleasure to Lady Rosamond. She looked at Maud with eyes that glistened brightly through her tears, and said almost eagerly:

"I am glad of that—very glad indeed. For I have been thinking, Miss Travers—I hope you will agree with me—that it would be very pleasant if you would come and live at Ilscote altogether."

Live at Ilscote altogether! live for ever in the companionship of that sweet lady whose presence exercised so potent and so soothing an influence over her spirit!—Maud could hardly believe that so much happiness was actually offered her.

"We are very dull here sometimes," continued Lady Rosamond, anxious that Maud's feelings should not be wounded by supposing the offer to be dictated by motives of charity or compassion. "My sister has often talked of having a lady to

live with us permanently, and I am sure we should have thought seriously of it long before now but for the difficulty of finding any one willing to join us whom we could make a friend of. It would be a great increase of happiness to us both to have you always with us. I was talking of it to my sister this morning, and she quite agreed with me. That is, Miss Travers, if you can be content to share a life so quiet as ours."

Maud still made no answer, and Lady Rosamond looked at her with an expression in her eyes almost of deprecation. She imagined that Maud's hesitation arose from a high-spirited feeling of reluctance to accept a position dependent on the good-will of others rather than on her own exertions; and she sorely blamed herself for her precipitation in making a proposal which she had intended to reserve till towards the close of her guest's present stay at Ilscote, when the development of a more intimate personal friendship should have broken down all scruples of this kind. But in truth such were not the considerations which at this moment kept Maud silent, feeling as one who has just been allowed a glimpse into an unattainable Eden. The affectionate reverence which had so quickly sprung up in her heart for her new friend was too strong to admit of any other sentiment where Lady Rosamond was concerned, and

she would have been only too thankful to accept the proffered privilege if she had not remembered that she could not be a permanent guest at Ilscote without incurring the risk, nay, almost the certainty, of recognition. For was not this kind friend of hers a friend of Philip Ormond's also? and, living always under that hospitable roof, was it not inevitable that she should sooner or later meet him? And recognition for her, did it not mean exposure and infamy for her father? It was hard, very hard, that only because Philip Ormond—happy, prosperous Philip Ormond—might sometimes spend a few days here, she, the homeless outcast, should have to renounce a prospect which seemed to open to her years of happiness; but, hard though it was, the renunciation must be made.

"I can never thank you enough," she murmured, "but—but . . . . Dear Lady Rosamond, I am not ungrateful, indeed I am not, but it is impossible, quite impossible. I wish I could tell you all that I feel, and then you would know that I am not ungrateful."

She looked up beseechingly, in such evident fear lest her motives should be misconstrued that Lady Rosamond hastened to soothe her, determining not to press her further on the subject till their friendship should be a few months older.

"I understand, my dear, I quite understand—" and indeed Lady Rosamond never doubted that she did. "Well, since you feel so strongly about it, I will not urge you more just now. You will come and see me very often—as often as you have any time to spare for spending with your friends? For I am sure that whether you live here or at Grantwick, you will always think of me as a friend, will you not?"

"Always, always — the kindest friend," said Maud in a choking voice.

Ay, the kindest, and not only the kindest, but the dearest, the best-beloved. Maud thought this, though she dared not give her thought words.

Lady Rosamond saw her emotion, and smiled at her affectionately.

"Even to see you occasionally will be a great pleasure to me, Miss Travers, though I still cannot help hoping that perhaps some day . . . . But I will say no more of that at present."

Perhaps some day! Well yes, perhaps some day that vision of Paradise which looked so bright in Maud's eyes that evening might indeed be realised. In ten or twenty years hence, say, when the bloom of youth should be gone from her cheeks, and years and care should have changed her past the danger of recognition. But even in this prospect, remote as it was, Maud found some

consolation. And in the mean time had she not been bid always to think of yonder benignant lady as her friend?

"And now I must not let you sit up any longer," went on Lady Rosamond; "it is getting very late, and you have been exerting yourself a great deal this evening. Good-night—and thank you for the pleasure you have given us."

She took her guest's hand, and pressed it with yet more than her usual kindness. She held it for some seconds, looking intently the while into the deep blue eyes that were gratefully raised to hers; then, apparently yielding to an irresistible impulse, drew Maud's face towards her own, and kissed it tenderly.

"God bless you, my dear," she whispered, "and make you happy always."

Whether by the suddenness of the action, or the gratitude which swelled her heart at this new mark of friendship, Maud's self-control was nearer breaking down now than at any previous moment since she had left home. She trembled strangely as she felt the touch of her friend's soft lips on hers; the tears rushed blinding into her eyes; and had she obeyed the promptings of her heart, she would have buried her face in Lady Rosamond's bosom and faltered out the whole story of her griefs and her wrongs, as a little child is made to

disburden itself of its troubles at the first words of sympathy from its nurse. For a moment she had almost yielded to the impulse, so strong it was; but she restrained herself in time, pressed Lady Rosamond's hand with eager, almost passionate, warmth, and hurried from the room without a word more.

It was long before she slept that night, agitated as she was by a crowd of conflicting emotions of which she hardly knew whether joy or sorrow was the strongest. She was happy—so happy—in knowing what she did of Lady Rosamond's feelings towards her; and yet, on the other hand, how cruelly tantalising it was that, invited by that beloved friend to share her home, she must, even at the risk of being thought ungrateful and cold-hearted, persist in abiding in her loneliness and desolation—an outcast for whom the gates of Elysium had been opened in vain. She found comfort at last, however, when she fell asleep, dreaming that somehow a strange transformation had taken place by which she was altogether metamorphosed from her former self, and enabled without fear of consequences to live in one household with Lady Rosamond.

CHAPTER V.

IN SANCTUARY.

WORN out bodily and mentally by the toils of the preceding day, the miserable man who lay under the hedge near Wittingham slept on, wrapped in heavy and dreamless yet unrefreshing slumber till long past sunrise. He was roused at length by the twittering of the birds overhead, and suddenly became broad awake. It was his first awaking since the deed which had stained his soul with a murderer's guilt, and what an awaking it was! Better that he should not have lost consciousness of his wretchedness at all than that the memory of it should rush back upon him as it did now, tainting the sweet breath of the morning air, obscuring the bright face of the summer sky, letting in as it were on his unprepared senses a whole accumulated flood of darkness and despair.

He lay a few minutes making thus renewed acquaintance with his misery; then, urged into action by the returning fears inspired by a recollec-

tion of all the circumstances of his position, raised himself with difficulty to his feet. When he stood up he was almost dismayed to find how stiff and aching were his limbs, how relaxed and faint his every muscle; it was rather as though he were at the end of a day of unresting labour than just awakened from a long sleep. But the desire of self-preservation was still strong as ever, and made him set pain and weakness at defiance with a dogged endurance which in some men and under some circumstances would have been heroism. He fortified himself as best he could for the fatigues before him by making a hasty meal of the remains of the previous day's dinner; and then, somewhat invigorated, made his way out of the field where he had passed the night, and regained the road to Kingshaven.

And thus began his second day's pilgrimage. The auspices under which he had commenced his wanderings yesterday had been sufficiently discouraging, but far more sinister were those under which he resumed them this morning—exhausted as he was by toil and privation, and, as he learned from a finger-post on the roadside, with nearly half his journey still before him. Then if he had feared exciting suspicion yesterday, how infinitely more he feared it to-day! inwardly conning and re-conning the language of the description

he had read of himself last evening, and wondering if so exact a portrait had ever been made in print before. Every human face that he saw turned in his direction filled him with creeping terror, and the occasional salutation of a passing waggoner or labourer startled him as though he had expected it to be followed by an instant accusation. Only one comfort he had; they had described him as he was the day before yesterday, elaborately dressed and of showy appearance, and to-day he was shabby and broken-down, begrimed from head to foot with the dust of country roads. Yet if this was in some respects a consolation, it was a source also of new apprehension. This very shabbiness was in itself calculated to arrest attention and excite suspicion, and he felt, or fancied he felt, that everybody he met looked at him curiously, as though surprised to see a well-dressed man present so worn-out and travel-stained an appearance. What would he not have given to be able to divest himself of the hateful fine-gentleman clothes on which he had so plumed himself two days ago, and how he envied the very tramps and beggars the rags in which they were able to come and go freely without feeling themselves marked men! But all idea of disguise was out of the question for the present, and on he went, in a fever of anxiety and suspense—his progress every

now and then delayed, as the day advanced and the roads began to be more frequented, by a long circuit taken to avoid villages and hamlets seen at a distance, sometimes, when possible, by a sudden retreat behind a hedge or clump of trees to escape the observation of even a solitary passer-by.

How bitterly he thought, not only of the original cowardice which had prompted him to leave the train at Thetbury, but of the cowardice by which he had afterwards wasted the golden opportunities that, as it seemed to him now, had still been his yesterday! Yesterday morning the news of his crime had hardly penetrated beyond the limits of Linchester, and he was free, if he had but known it, to carry a bold front before all the world. He might have ordered a chaise from that jovial-faced landlord whose proffer of hospitality had so scared him, which would have taken him half way to Kingshaven in a few hours; and ten to one—at least so he told himself now—neither landlord nor driver would have thought of associating so ordinary an incident with the subsequently received tidings from Linchester. But to-day the hue and cry was raised; the pursuers were on his track, and he had no choice but to drag himself onward, even if fainting with weariness and hunger. For hunger was already beginning to make itself felt again; and though yesterday the jovial-faced landlord,

with no questions asked, would have feasted him to his heart's content, to-day he might not present himself at a wayside cottage to ask for a crust of bread without incurring a risk which he could not bring himself to face.

Strange that with all his intensity of nervous fear, his morbid acuteness in scenting danger from every direction and under every guise, he should yet be able to look forward with such undoubting hopefulness as he did to the prospects awaiting him at Kingshaven, thinking of the place as of a sanctuary where, could he but reach it, he would find rest and safety and all necessary facilities for completing his escape. But so it was. He had been regarding Kingshaven as his asylum and resting-place all through his weary journey, and he could not permit himself to contemplate the possibility of disappointment on gaining it, the perils and hardships he endured serving not unnaturally to magnify the value of the object sought. Thus when, late in the afternoon, after hours of slow painful plodding, he arrived at the top of a hill showing him a long strip of vaporous haze in the horizon which he knew to be the far-off sea, his fainting courage was revived, and, forgetting for a while his bodily ailments, he pressed on with renewed vigour. Let him but make his way down yonder, and all would be well.

He had still a long distance to go, however — a distance which, even with fresh and untaxed powers, it would take hours to accomplish on foot; and besides the constant delays imposed on him by the real or fancied necessity of avoiding observation, he was compelled by sheer weakness to travel slowly and give himself rest frequently. Thus minute after minute, hour after hour, glided by, and he was yet struggling painfully onward towards a still remote destination. Again the western sky arrayed itself in gold and purple to welcome home the gradually descending sun; again those glowing tints faded into the pale azure of evening twilight; again the faintly glimmering stars came forth one by one; again night, following on the heels of departing day, resumed her sway over the earth; and he was still a miserable lonely fugitive, urged onward and ever onward by the consuming terrors of a guilty conscience, and nowhere finding rest for the sole of his foot. For exhausted and almost fainting though he was, he would not this night permit himself to spend the precious hours in slumber. If he lay down tonight, perhaps in the morning he would have no strength to go forward. On then, on; but a little further now, and he would find all he wanted— rest for his aching bones and throbbing head, food to allay the fierce ravening pains that ever and

anon raged within him as though they would tear him to pieces. On, on—comfort awaited him yonder; he never doubted that.

The short summer night—it did not seem short to him—came to an end before his slow crawling pace had brought him to the goal of his hopes and his strivings. But he knew he was very near it now, and the knowledge gave him strength still to push forward. At last, just as the grey mists of morning were beginning to roll away before the first golden darts sent into their midst by the rising sun, he rounded an angle in the road, and saw a blue gleaming expanse of ever-shifting water spread out before him not half-a-mile from where he stood, and nearer yet the red-tiled roofs and smokeless chimneys of a large but still sleeping town. A little further, and he found himself walking down a road bordered with trim villas and cottages *ornés* on each side, while ever louder and louder sounded in his ears the regular rush of waves breaking on a pebbly beach.

And here was Kingshaven; here was the place where, according to the fixed idea which had held possession of him for the last two days, sustaining him in the midst of toil and suffering that would else have been unendurable, he was to find meat and drink and sleep—all that with superhuman effort he had been nerving himself so long to do

without. But now that the time had come, now that the goal was reached, whither was he to turn? to whom was he to apply for satisfaction of the wants that began to beset him with redoubled fury? A strange misgiving crept over him as he confessed to himself that he did not know; that he felt as much at a loss how to obtain food and shelter here, in Kingshaven, as he could have done at any previous stage of his wanderings.

The road he had followed brought him to the sea-side at the fashionable end of the town—for Kingshaven is a favourite summer resort of holiday-makers as well as a busy commercial port—and he found himself alone on the deserted parade, gazing up with eager famine-sharpened eyes at a row of white palatial-looking mansions fronting the sea. Alas! no hope for him was there. True, one of the houses, the largest and most palatial-looking of them all, was an hotel, where the hospitality he sought was bought and sold every day. But at this hour of the morning the place was close shut; and even had it been open, how durst he, a shabby travel-stained wanderer—bearing, as he felt, the stamp of the pariah in every feature, every article of attire — seek shelter in a magnificent establishment like that, an establishment where beyond a doubt the *Times* and *Wittingham Herald* were taken in as a matter

of course? He turned away hopelessly from his inspection of these stolid-seeming grandee mansions, and dragged his tottering limbs along the sea-front of the town towards the part which an assemblage of masts and rigging showed to be the harbour end of it. But all the houses and shops that he passed were closed; in the whole place there was hardly a sign of life. On coming near the harbour, he saw indeed a group of some dozen sailors and fishermen collected on the beach a little way below him, watching the progress of a small fishing boat that had just put off, and in his desperation was half inclined for a moment to go down to them and ask them to set him in the way of finding food and lodging. But they were talking and laughing uproariously, and altogether seemed such happy rollicking fellows that he felt an instinctive repulsion to them. Such men were his natural foes now. The very sound of their laughter grated on his nerves; and then how they would hate him if they knew what he had done! So he shuddered and turned away, as he had turned away from the fine houses on the parade; he must seek succour elsewhere. But where? that was the question. And succour he must have presently, or die.

He came away from the harbour, and struck into a side street that he found running at right

angles to it. There were no villas nor cottages *ornés* here, but instead of these, on each side of the narrow way, a succession of closely packed houses of various sizes and various architectural periods—little hucksters' shops with gabled roofs and overhanging windows, many-storied warehouses of rectangular form and dismally flat surface—the whole fused into unity by a general seediness of aspect and an omnipresent smell of tar and stale fish. But though it was evident that this street, seen at a later hour of the day, was one of the busiest in the town, it was at present empty and deserted, and the now starving fugitive walked along it looking right and left without finding a single shop from which the shutters were yet taken down. He went on till it began gradually to widen into a country road, and the smell of the tar and stale fish had become scarcely perceptible, when—just as he was asking himself despairingly what he should do if he found himself in the open country again without having succeeded in his quest—he came on a shabby inn, or rather ale-house, standing by itself a little way back from the wayside, with a couple of horse-troughs in front which a man was at that moment busily engaged in cleaning.

A sallow-hued hard-featured man he was, with high cheek-bones, thin compressed lips, and small deep-set eyes—not nearly so pleasant to look at as

the jovial-faced landlord of yesterday. But for that very reason Francis Godfrey felt less repugnance to him; what did he want with cheerful faces and hail-fellow-well-met airs? And besides, he had held out till he could hold out no longer.

"Will you let me have breakfast, if you please?"

It was the first time he had heard himself speak since he had been in the stationer's shop at Wittingham, and he hardly recognised his own voice, so hoarse it was with weakness and disuse.

The man looked surlily up from his work, and, by no means prepossessed either with the speaker's humble address or shabby exterior, answered crossly:

"It ain't my way, or my missus's either, to wait upon folks in the middle of the night. And not in the day-time either, unless we think they have money to pay for it," he added grimly.

"Oh! but I have plenty of money," said Francis eagerly—"quite enough, I mean. I will pay you beforehand if you like."

The eccentricity of the proposal evidently excited the man's surprise, for his deep-set ferret-like little eyes fastened themselves on the intending customer with a sharp inquisitive look, which, while it lasted, made Francis, absorbed though his

faculties were in the all-mastering craving for food, tremble with apprehension. What was then his relief on finding, as in another moment he did, that the result of the inspection had been apparently altogether in his favour? All trace of surliness and distrust disappeared from the man's face, and the hard features were warmed up with a broad good-humoured grin that was almost friendly; while, throwing off the cynical asperity which had hitherto characterised his manner, he made answer in the tones of rustic simplicity that seemed natural to him:

"I ax your pardon, sir, and so I do, but there be such a lot of queer customers a going just now that poor country-folks like me and my old 'oman need to look about us pretty sharp. Howsomever, I ought to have knowed a gen'l'man when I seed him, and so I ought, and I hope you'll look it over. Breakfast did you say, sir? With all the pleasure in life, and I wish I'd another such to wait on every mornin'. This way, sir; I be rare and glad to see ye."

So this was a jovial landlord after all, in spite of a somewhat sour exterior. Francis was not sorry to find that it was so; the most officious hospitality was a relief after the inquisitive look which for the moment had so affrighted him. He joyfully followed his host—Mr. Dibbins of the 'Rising Sun,'

according to the inscription painted on the weather-beaten sign-board that hung over the entrance—and presently found himself in a dingy-looking kitchen, in which a newly-lit fire was struggling into existence on a capacious hearth the sides of which were garnished with clustering bunches of red herrings. With a hospitable zeal quite remarkable in a man of his apparently stolid temperament, Mr. Dibbins went forward to clear a place at the table for his guest with his own hands.

"Plague take them election bills, they be always in the way," he said, hastily crumpling together a few sheets of printed paper and thrusting them into a drawer. "Sit 'ee down, sir; the old 'oman will be here directly; she be up and dressed long ago, for we bain't none on us lie-a-beds on washing day. Sally, Sally, you're wanted," he shouted, raising his voice to its loudest pitch.

A gaunt large-boned woman made her appearance at a back door, wiping the suds from her arms with a wet towel.

"What is it now?" she inquired rather gruffly.

"Breakfast for this gentleman, my dear," said Mr. Dibbins, not without a certain air of deference in his manner. "And don't be longer about it then you can help, please. Sit 'ee down, sir, do pray; the missus won't make you bide long, she

be a rare handy lass, and so she be, though I say it what oughtn't to."

The woman cast a look of evident surprise towards her husband, and another towards the visitor, but said nothing, and proceeded to the silent but active preparation of breakfast. To such good purpose did she exert herself that in a very few minutes the meal was ready and placed before the famished guest, who forthwith began to eat with a keenness of appetite which not all his dread of exciting suspicion could enable him to conceal.

"I have come down to this part of the country on a walking tour," he said, bethinking himself of his old device. "It has made me very hungry, as you see."

"A good thing, too, sir," said Mr. Dibbins approvingly. "I love to see folks enjoying of their victuals. Sally, my lass, there bain't no call to hinder the wash any longer; I know thee beest fretting to get to thy tubs again."

Mrs. Dibbins darted a glance at her husband which might have been taken for displeasure rather than gratitude, stood for a moment visibly hesitating, and finally walked off with a somewhat defiant toss of the head. Her departure was a relief to Francis, who had been rendered uncomfortable by the manifest curiosity with which she

regarded him. Mr. Dibbins indeed still remained behind, hovering about his guest with a dirty towel over his arm intended to do duty as a napkin; but then Mr. Dibbins seemed hardly to look at him, and had besides so much of the gaping rustic in his manner that Francis did not much mind his presence.

"You don't often have such an early visitor, I suppose," he said as he went on with his meal, and gradually recovered sufficient energy to attempt an explanation of suspicious circumstances. "The fact is, I haven't been in bed all night. I lost my way in the fields yesterday evening, and didn't find the road again till the inns were all shut up."

"Lord love 'ee, sir! you must be tired," said Mr. Dibbins sympathisingly. "I be right down sorry for you, sir."

How innocently this country bumpkin swallowed down everything he was told! Francis felt that he could hardly congratulate himself enough on having fallen in with such an entertainer.

"Have a drop of spirits in your tea, sir," said Mr. Dibbins kindly. "There be some beautiful rum in the cupboard."

The offer was eagerly accepted, and Mr. Dibbins hospitably filled up his guest's cup with strong liquor till it overflowed into the saucer.

"It's the best straight from Jamaiky," said the

landlord complacently. "Me and my old 'oman we be in the way of getting such like things, you see, sir, along of being so friendly with the blue-jackets what are always going back'ards and for'ards to them furrin parts. We have a mortal sight of such about the house, to be sure."

So here was an opportunity of gaining the information he required with regard to the vessels that were likely to be leaving the port within the next day or two! Francis stole a glance at the landlord's face to assure himself that he would be safe in making his inquiries. The result was completely satisfactory; it was enough to look at the man's foolish unmeaning grin to feel sure that his stupidity might be relied on to any extent.

"Ah! so you have a great deal to do with sailors, have you?" he said as indifferently as he could. "Do you happen to know if there is much doing down at the harbour just now? many vessels taking in goods and passengers and so on?"

"Bless your heart, sir, I should think I did; why, I could name you all the craft in port as if they was my own children, pretty nigh. Let's see, there's the 'Betsy Jane' to sail for Ry Janairy the middle of next month, and the 'Elfin' for New Zealand the end of next week, and the 'Trident' for the Cape as soon as she's got herself fresh caulked . . . . bless you, I knows every one on 'em, sir."

"And there are plenty more, of course? plenty starting this week, I mean—to-day or to-morrow perhaps."

"Well, I don't know about plenty, sir. There's the 'Castor and Plucks' for Liverpool this evening, and the 'Vixen' for Portsmouth to-morrow, and—stop a bit—Ay, to be sure, there's the 'Ocean Pearl' for New York the day arter."

"The 'Ocean Pearl'—that's a pretty name. A fast-going ship, can you say?"

"Fast? I should think so, sir. If you was only to ax my cousin Charley Wilks . . . . But poor fellow, we bain't to see him no more here. She's a reg'lar beauty, sir—one of the fastest craft out."

"Oh indeed! then she is a great favourite, no doubt. What is the latest day for taking out a passage in her, do you know?"

"Last Saturday, sir, I be well-nigh sure. But in coorse the cap'n would make room for any gen'l'man as was recommended by a friend. May be you'd like me to ax him, sir? He's well beknown to me, and has bin this ever so long, which it 'ud ha' bin a bad look-out if he hadn't, leastways that time that Charley was in trouble."

The last words contained a suggestion which made the listener's heart bound with suddenly

found hope. Was he about to discover that he had fallen among kindred spirits?

"In trouble?" he stammered. "You mean" . .

He paused, but Mr. Dibbins appeared to understand the drift of the question, and clasped his throat significantly.

"Not quite so bad as this, you know, sir, but not far off. A case of appointment to Colonies or Board of Works for twenty years or life. He warn't a chap to do things by halves, warn't my cousin Charley."

Francis was silent for a few moments; he could hardly credit his good fortune. For here, as it seemed, he had accidentally stumbled on a haunt of those who were henceforth to be his natural friends and allies.

"And—and this cousin of yours, how did he get on?" he asked at length in a voice tremulous with agitation.

"Get on! get off, you mean. Why, to be sure, he's in Merriky long ago where he'll never be heard of more. Law bless you, I never undertook yet to help a gentleman in difficulties but what I did help him and no mistake."

Mr. Dibbins winked a wink in which a whole world of meaning seemed to be compressed; he was evidently not altogether the stupid rustic he had appeared a while ago. And though Francis

had congratulated himself on his host's presumed simplicity then, he congratulated himself ten times more now; if he had found a friend, the shrewder that friend was the better.

"I am to understand, then, that you have had experience in such cases?" he inquired hesitatingly.

"I should think I have, sir, rather. Lord love your innocent eyes, do you s'pose we don't see plenty such in a place like this, where the ships are so handy? You don't know the world, sir, or you wouldn't ask."

It was somehow pleasant to Francis to hear the subject treated in this manner, as if there were nothing in the circumstances of his case but what was matter of every-day experience. He felt wonderfully comforted and encouraged, and, filling up his cup again with rum, asked his friendly host:

"Do you think you can manage to get me a passage in this vessel you were speaking of? I will make it worth your while to take the trouble."

"That's enough, sir," said Mr. Dibbins with another wink. "Make your mind easy; you come to the right shop when you come to me. Maybe you'd like to lie down a bit, sir?—you look to be tired—and I'll go down to the harbour the while."

Tired! yes, he was tired enough—tired almost to death. His hunger was satisfied at length, and

his fatigue had consequently become more overwhelming than ever, so that the invitation to repose was altogether irresistible. Besides, he had found safety now—an asylum where he might rest while others watched for him. He staggered to his feet—in his weak exhausted state the rum had not been without an effect, of which he had been almost unconscious before, but which he felt now that he stood up—and, grasping his host's outstretched arm, allowed himself to be conducted upstairs. Here he was shown into a garret, barely furnished, and to an ordinary observer comfortless enough, but which, containing as it did a bed, seemed to the worn and wearied fugitive nothing less than a sanctuary of peace and repose.

"Here you are," said Mr. Dibbins, "and here you may sleep as safe as safe. Trust me for looking sharp arter you, sir."

"It is all arranged then? I may quite depend on you?"

"All right, sir, I 'm the man to take care of you. Good-bye; I shall come to see you again at dinner-time."

Mr. Dibbins went out, and Francis was alone—alone, and free to enjoy the rest after which for so many dreary hours he had panted. At last he had gained the asylum so long sought; at last fortune had gratified him even beyond his expec-

tations. Then the devil that had tempted him at Walford's had been true to him after all! With something like a feeling of gratitude to the agency, whatever it was, that had so far favoured him, he threw himself on the bed, and in the next moment was buried in a deep, almost death-like, sleep.

Meanwhile Mr. Dibbins had returned to the kitchen, and was standing pensively in front of the fire, rubbing his hands slowly together, and giving vent from time to time to a low guttural noise that sounded not unlike a suppressed chuckle. Whatever might be the subject of his reverie, he was roused from it presently by the entrance of Mrs. Dibbins, who, having first peeped in to ascertain if her husband was alone, approached with a bold decided step which showed that she did not stand in the slightest awe of him.

"Now then, Tom, what was it all about?" she asked as she sat down by the fire and dried her arms with her apron. "You need 'nt think you 're going to keep me in the dark, you know, for you ain't."

"What was what all about?" asked Mr. Dibbins grimly; he was evidently not in a communicative mood.

"Why, the way you went on just now, to be sure, speaking like as if you 'd been feeding pigs all your life instead of a respectable Christian

man. You meant something by it, I know that, and I want to be told what. And sending me away too—I had a precious good mind not to stir an inch, I can tell you, and wouldn't if I hadn't seen you winking at me."

"It's an uncommon good job you did see me then, Mrs. D., that's all I can say. You had better get on with your wash; you will know what you will know when you know it, and not sooner."

"But I *will* know it sooner," vociferated Mrs. Dibbins, bringing the palms of her hands together with an emphatic smack that made her husband wince. "I will know it at once, this very minute, and you may make up your mind to that. A pretty thing indeed that I should be ordered out of the room like a dog in my own house, bought and paid for with my own money, and not know the reason why! Perhaps you don't remember that, Mr. Dibbins—bought and paid for with my own money, which I might have knowed it was nothing but the money you cared for, or why did you let me stop in service till my uncle died afore you married me, as I wish now you hadn't, for there was the milkman and baker as was both very partial to me, and would have been equally as pleased as you to have money to retire and set up a public with. Oh dear! Oh dear! little I thought it would come to this—Oh dear!"

Mrs. Dibbins gave signs of being about to fall into hysterics; and Mr. Dibbins, partly through fear of her cries awakening the sleeper upstairs, partly through apprehension of what the result of an open quarrel would be for himself (the pair being too equally matched for either not to regard the other with a certain degree of respect), made haste to retreat from an untenable position.

"Come, come, my dear, I was only joking," he said soothingly; "you're fit to be trusted with anything, I know. They say a woman can't keep a secret, but I don't suppose that holds with you."

The compliment was probably not undeserved, for if there is anything in physiognomy, Mrs. Dibbins was a woman quite strong-minded enough to be able to keep her own counsel.

The lady allowed herself to be pacified, and Mr. Dibbins immediately went to the table where the remains of his guest's breakfast still lay, and, opening the drawer, took thence the papers which he had stuffed into it so hastily a while before.

"Look at them bills, my dear—any of 'em will do; they're all alike. Just read one on 'em through, and let me know what you think of it."

Mrs. Dibbins did as she was told, and, as she read, her face gradually lighted up with an expression of intense interest.

"Why, that's him to a hair!" she said as she

had finished—"leastways if he hadn't been all over dust as he was; it made me quite stare to see such a curious-looking chap. But I say, Tom, what have you done with him? you have never been and let two hundred pounds slip through your fingers, have you?"

Mr. Dibbins laid his forefinger expressively on his nose.

"Do you think I've been a sergeant of police ten years, and got so much green left in my eye as that comes to? I'll tell you what I've done with him, my dear—landed him safe and sound in bed upstairs, sleeping as fast as a church. Ha! ha! it ain't for nothing my mates christened me the Nabber. They always knowed Tom Dibbins for a sharp 'un, and I think when they hear of this they'll say private life ain't took the edge off him yet."

He rubbed his hands complacently, conscious that Mrs. Dibbins was looking at him with eyes of mingled pride and admiration.

"Well, you *are* a man! Two hundred pounds! law, won't it be beautiful? But I say, Tom, you are quite sure he is the right one, I hope? One does hear of mistakes sometimes, you know."

"The right one!" said Mr. Dibbins a little contemptuously, "I warrant you he's the right one. Don't you know orders was sent down to the force

here to be on the look-out for him? I was talking it over with some of my old mates only last night, and they made almost sure he would be coming this way, for they'd just had word that a chap exactly like him was seen the night afore last in a stationer's shop at Wittingham. Why, he has hardly been lost sight of, as you may say, since he got into the train at Linchester and out again at Thetbury. What do you think made 'em give me such a lot of handbills to put about if they hadn't been expecting him down this way? Oh! he's the right one, you needn't be afraid of that, and nabbed as tight as if I had hold of him by the collar."

"Why then, my Dibbins, sure enough the two hundred pounds is ours," said the lady ecstatically. "When do you think they'll give it you, Tom? to-day or to-morrow, or when?"

"Not to-day nor yet to-morrow," said Mr. Dibbins drily; "they don't do things in that style. But look here, Sally, I'm not going to be in a hurry, and you mustn't either. I'm not sure that I shall say anything about it for a day or two."

"Not say anything about it! Why, Tom, what do you mean? The sooner the better, isn't it?"

"Sometimes, my dear, but not always. What

should you say if the reward was three hundred pounds, eh?"

"Well, but it isn't, Tom, you know," very naturally responded Mrs. Dibbins.

"It isn't yet, my dear, but ten to one it will be. You see as yet it's only a robbery and murderous assault, but it's as safe as anything can be that it will be a murder afore the week's out; for the chap he knocked down has never spoke since, and the doctors have all made up their minds to it that he must go off as sure as eggs is eggs. And if our gentleman isn't found by that time, why, my dear, they're sure to clap on another hundred. That's worth waiting for, I think, and I've managed matters so that he won't expect to get away from this for a couple of days to come."

"How clever you are, Tom!" said the admiring wife in tender accents. "It would be so nice to get three hundred pounds, wouldn't it?"

"Rather," said Mr. Dibbins with grim humour. "Well, there's no harm in trying it on at all events, for in the mean time I've got him as safely caged as ever such a bird was. Safely caged, yes, safely caged—you may trust Tom Dibbins for that."

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECOND DAY AT LINCHESTER.

THAT second day of flight which had been so full of dismal experiences for the unhappy wayfarer journeying to Kingshaven had meanwhile not passed uneventfully at Linchester. On the contrary, it was a day of excitement and commotion quite unusual in that generally tranquil, not to say sluggish, little city; the public mind having been disturbed from an early hour of the morning, not only by conflicting reports concerning the chances of capturing the criminal and the condition of the victim, but by a yet more disquieting rumour to the effect that Walford's was in danger of stopping payment.

The currency of such a rumour was chiefly due to Mr. Walford's own imprudence, his display of frantic agitation on the previous day having naturally inclined people to believe that a ruinous loss had been sustained; and most terribly did his

indiscretion react upon himself. His excitement on first hearing of the robbery was redoubled when he found that his worst fears were realised by a run on the bank which threatened to exhaust the funds available at so short a notice; and all that day he remained in a state of frenzy which at once rendered him incapable of attending properly to business and was terribly calculated to injure still further the credit of the firm with those who saw him.

At this crisis Mr. Puddicombe, with his lawyer-like shrewdness and imperturbability, proved an invaluable friend. At his suggestion, Mr. Naggles, the senior clerk, had been recalled by telegraph from the watering-place where he had been staying for his health; so that, in the continued absence of Mr. Fleming—who, strangely enough, had not yet made his re-appearance either at his own home or at the bank—there was at least one person on the premises who understood the affairs of the establishment and was able to return a cool answer to the inquiries of alarmed customers. Nor was this Mr. Puddicombe's only service. By dint of skilful manœuvring, he managed to secure a pretty complete monopoly of Mr. Walford's attention all through the day, thereby preventing him from doing a world of mischief. Thus he would engage his client by the hour in discussions as to the pro-

spect of tracing the criminal; and, when these showed symptoms of flagging, would carry him off to the next street to ascertain if Mr. Fleming had come home.

"Not back yet!" growled Mr. Walford when, on the second or third of these visits to his partner's house, he found that nothing had yet been seen of him. "Not back yet, confound you! how often are you going to tell me that? And when the devil is he to be back then?"

"Which I can't inform you, sir, no more than the babe unborn," said Mrs. Badgett, who, as she afterwards expressed it, was all of a tremble at the gentleman's blusterous ways. "When he went away first thing yesterday, he said as how he'd be back by latest this morning and p'raps last night, which I had the beautifullest supper ready for him on the chance—a stewed rabbit and the finest I ever ate, and I've ate a many being particular partial to 'em, 'specially if done as they ought to be, soft as soft, and smothered with onions. He can't be much longer, sir, I shouldn't think. May be you'd like to step upstairs and wait?"

Mr. Puddicombe caught at the suggestion. Anything to keep his excited client out of mischief.

"I think we better had, Mr. Walford. It is so necessary that we should get the earliest possible information regarding the character and ante-

cedents of this man Godfrey—so highly necessary. By all means let us wait."

Mr. Walford did not exactly see wherein the necessity consisted, but he had a vague idea that Mr. Puddicombe must be right in this as in all things else, and, grumblingly acquiescing in that gentleman's superior wisdom, allowed himself to be ushered upstairs.

"What the devil does Fleming mean by it?" he exclaimed angrily, as, fuming with impatience, he paced up and down the little sitting-room into which he and Mr. Puddicombe had been shown. "Three o'clock in the day, and not back yet! And in the mean time I'm being ruined—ruined," he repeated, clenching his fists with convulsive vehemence.

"My dear sir!" remonstrated Mr. Puddicombe, congratulating himself on having succeeded in removing his client beyond the hearing of the bank customers.

"What hinders him? what can he be about? that's what I want to know," shouted Mr. Walford. "Is he ill? is he dead? or what? I shall go mad—I know I shall."

"Don't make yourself uneasy, Mr. Walford, pray. I have no fear but that Mr. Fleming is as well as you and I are. These little delays will

happen sometimes. He will return very soon now, I don't doubt."

Here Mr. Puddicombe, with the best intentions in the world, was guilty of a very wide deviation from his usual veraciousness. For the fact was, he had a private opinion of his own—an opinion which he was only waiting to be a little surer of before he propounded it to his client—to the effect that Mr. Fleming was not going to return at all.

But for once the lawyer, with all his astuteness, was mistaken. Mr. Fleming was returning as fast as an express train could carry him, and was already near the conclusion of his journey at the time the above-recorded conversation was taking place. He had been detained in London till that morning by a desire to see Francis Godfrey, who, as he supposed, must have taken his way back to town immediately on being missed from the little room off the bank parlour, and to whom he wished to speak a few words of warning with regard to the future. As soon as he had transacted his business with the money-lender—whose claims, as he discovered without surprise, had been fraudulently magnified in the memorandum handed him by his persecutor—he repaired to Francis's lodgings, never dreaming but that he should find him. He wondered a little on learning that the young man had not been seen

there since his presumed return from Linchester; but still he did not think of doubting that Francis was in London, easily accounting for his non-appearance at home by his well-known habits of dissipation. Reluctant to return without having brought matters to a settlement, Mr. Fleming resolved, at whatever inconvenience, to remain in London till the next morning. He called once again at Francis's dwelling later in the evening, still to find him absent; and shortly afterwards, tired out with the fatigues and harassments of the day, went to bed, without having seen the evening papers containing a telegram of the news from Linchester. The next morning, yet ignorant of what had happened, he went a third time in quest of Francis, of course again with the same result; after which, not choosing to risk a further loss of his precious hours, he set out on his return journey.

A miserable, most miserable, journey it was to him. He had bought a morning paper at starting, and the first thing that caught his eye was a paragraph setting forth the event which had just spread consternation among the inhabitants of Linchester. The account was a bald and meagre one compared with the glowing and circumstantial version which had met Francis's eyes the night before in the *Wittingham Herald;* the tidings

naturally not possessing quite so thrilling an interest for Londoners as for the provincial community round Linchester. Still, while its omissions were sufficiently numerous to throw Mr. Fleming into a fever of suspense and anxiety to learn more, it contained enough to leave no doubt upon his mind, first, that poor Bob was dead or dying, the victim of a cruel and dastardly murder, and next that Francis Godfrey, the owner of the ivory-handled bamboo found upstairs, was the assassin.

The news—so terrible in itself and so abruptly communicated—produced a fearful effect on him. He was at first, indeed, so stunned by it that he could scarcely take in the meaning of the words he read; then, as he gradually realised their full significance, he fell into a tumultuous state of conflicting passions and emotions which in its violence seemed to shake his nature to its very foundations. Horror, sorrow, indignation, all were there—horror at a bloody crime perpetrated within the familiar circle of his every-day surroundings, sorrow for the fate of the poor lad for whom perhaps he had felt more regard than for any other creature with whom his daily life brought him into contact, indignation fierce and unquenchable against the abhorred wretch that had been his murderer. But yet deeper perhaps than his compassion for poor Bob, stronger than his resentment against the criminal,

more all-pervading even than his horror, was the sense of shame and degradation which overwhelmed him at the recollection of the relations existing between Francis Godfrey and himself.

When he thought how that man had come to have a footing in the house where he had left such a bloody token of his villany behind, it seemed to him that he, Gilbert Fleming, was directly responsible for the consequences that had ensued—the murder of the poor boy who had been his friend, the plunder of the property of his partner and his partner's customers. He had received a villain, and one whom he knew to be a villain, in the place of business which belonged not only to him but to his partner also; and behold the result. And why had he done this? why had he suffered that accursed presence in the house for an instant? He writhed in a very agony of remorse and humiliation as he answered the question. Because he was in the man's power; because his name and fame were no longer in his own keeping, but in that of yonder miscreant; because he had managed matters so that his fortunes were inextricably knitted up with those of a robber and a murderer.

How he shuddered at the idea! shuddered at it as a living man tied to a corpse by way of punishment may shudder at the Mezentian contact. In

the anguish which it caused him he even tried to persuade himself that perhaps the suspicion which appeared so well founded was the mere result of a fortuitous combination of unfavourable appearances —that perhaps after all Francis Godfrey might be innocent. Yet even while he made-believe to doubt the guilt that seemed so clearly proved, he did not doubt really, and always returned to the loathing horror which had taken possession of him on first learning what the man was accused of with whom his crimes and his fears had connected him so closely. Alas! what would become of the good name he had striven to retain at such a sacrifice of self-respect, if it should be known abroad that he was in league with a felon—that he had been the tool and accomplice of a murderer? If it should be known! merciful Heaven! what would he not give to be able to persuade himself that a chance existed of its not being known!

He had always struggled, and hitherto with tolerable success, to bear up under the trials of which he had endured so many of late; he knew that they were the consequences of his own wrong-doing, and he had laboured to bear them as a brave man should. But this last calamity appeared completely to break down and crush him. The elasticity of his spirit was worn out, and both body and mind were for the time prostrated by the

blow. A feeling of lassitude and exhaustion gradually crept over him; his brain grew dizzy and confused with the effort of thinking; strange noises sounded in his ears, and sharp arrowy pains shot through his head. Such symptoms had not been unfamiliar to him of late; but he had never felt them as he felt them now, had never been so incapable of exerting himself to throw them off. By the time he reached Linchester they had so far increased as to make him positively shrink from the idea of facing his partner or anybody else who would talk to him, and compel him to talk, on the subject which it maddened him even to think of. Immediately, therefore, on arriving, he threw himself into a fly and told the man to drive him, not to the bank, but to his own dwelling. He must have rest, time to arrange his ideas—rest above all—before he could be fit for connected thought or conversation. He was panting for the quiet of his own chamber; and, having arrived at his house and admitted himself by a latch-key, he began mounting the stairs with eager impatience. But rest and quiet were not yet to be his. As he reached the top of the first flight, the door facing him was suddenly flung open, and he found himself confronted by Mr. Walford.

"So you are here at last!" was the first greeting of that gentleman, whose vigilant ears

had not failed to recognise the sound of his partner's footsteps. "And now that you are here, what have you to tell me? Where is he? what has he done with the money?"

"My dear sir!" expostulated a mellifluous voice proceeding from behind Mr. Walford's shoulder, "what a question to ask! As if Mr. Fleming had any possible means of knowing! How do you do, Mr. Fleming? I am delighted to see you."

Mr. Puddicombe came forward to shake hands, and with some difficulty Mr. Fleming recovered from the first stupor of surprise sufficiently to return the courtesy and to allow himself, almost as one in a dream, to be conducted into the room where the two gentlemen had been waiting for him.

"You have heard of this deplorable affair, I presume?" asked Mr. Puddicombe — speaking rather hastily, to prevent himself from being anticipated by his impatient client.

Mr. Fleming bowed his head in acquiescence — he was thoroughly bewildered and confused.

"Ah yes! of course; everybody is speaking about it. Sit down, Mr. Fleming, pray; you need rest after your journey. A long journey, I conclude? you are looking a little knocked up."

"From London," stammered Mr. Fleming, while he mechanically seated himself. "I—I was unexpectedly called there on business."

His heart turned cold within him as he spoke the words; what would be thought of him if it were ever found out what his business had been?

"Oh indeed!" said the lawyer, mentally registering the answer. "You did not happen to leave word where you were going, otherwise we should have endeavoured to communicate with you sooner. You see, my dear sir, under the circumstances it has been rather an object with us to communicate with you as soon as possible, in order to obtain your assistance with reference to a few points which" . . . .

"The long and the short of it is," interrupted Mr. Walford, "What do you know about that villain? Who is he? what is he? who are his friends? where does he come from? where is he likely to escape to? Escape! no, damn it, that's not the word; he shan't escape if there's law in England."

"You mean Francis Godfrey?" asked Mr. Fleming in a hoarse voice—how hard he found it to pronounce the hated name!

"Of course I mean Francis Godfrey; who the devil should I mean else? isn't it Francis Godfrey who has made a beggar of me? But he shall hang for it, take my word for that; he hasn't ruined me and murdered my clerk for nothing."

"Perhaps—perhaps you are mistaken," deprecatingly murmured Mr. Fleming. "He may not be guilty after all."

How he wished he could believe in his own words!

"Not guilty!" exclaimed Mr. Walford, almost choking with passion. "But I tell you he is guilty, I tell you he" . . . . .

"Had we not better hear what Mr. Fleming has to say about it?" meekly interposed the lawyer. "I quite agree with you so far as appearances are concerned, but there is nothing like hearing all sides. You have some special reason for believing the young man to be innocent, Mr. Fleming, I need not ask?"

Mr. Fleming was silent.

"You have known him a long time, perhaps, and have had many opportunities of observing his character?"

"Not very long. But—but I was well acquainted with his father."

"Ah! with his father — then of course this young man, being the son of an old friend, is well known to you; perhaps indeed you are a little partial, but I won't insist on that. And from what you have seen of him, you judge him incapable of committing such a crime as that imputed to him, do you?"

Mr. Fleming hesitated. Should he tell this lie,

and add yet another knot to the fatal bonds that linked him to that man? or should he speak the truth and brave all consequences rather than entangle himself further? He hesitated still; confused and half stunned as he was, he felt that he had for the moment lost the power of coherent reasoning.

Ere he could frame a reply, a tap was heard at the door of the room, and Mrs. Badgett entered.

"Oh! if you please, sir, here's a letter."

He was only too thankful to find an excuse for not answering Mr. Puddicombe's question, and, snatching the missive from her hands, tore it open with a muttered apology. But no sooner had he done so than an almost death-like change came over his already pale and haggard countenance, a spasmodic tremor ran through his whole frame, his lips parted as though to emit a cry of dismay, and his eyes fastened themselves on the page before him with a straining intensity of gaze that betokened deep and horror-struck interest.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Walford, who, though not keen of perception, could not help noticing that his partner was unusually moved. "Anything about business?"

He stretched out his hand for the letter, taking for granted that it concerned them both. But Mr. Fleming started away from him with a gesture

almost of terror, and, crushing the paper together, thrust it with convulsive haste into his pocket. Heavens! what would become of him if it were known that that man—the robber and murderer—had the right to threaten him?

"It is nothing," he faltered—"nothing to do with business, I assure you."

Mr. Walford made no remark; he was not an observant man, and had hardly noticed the full extent of his partner's agitation. Meanwhile Mr. Puddicombe, though a very observant man indeed, contented himself with making a mental note of the incident, and reverted to the question for which he had been awaiting an answer when the letter had arrived.

"About this young man, my dear sir—this most unhappy young man, as there seems only too good reason to call him—did I understand you to say that your knowledge of him was favourable or the reverse? You see it is important to collect all the information regarding him that we can."

Again Mr. Fleming hesitated. But he thought of the menacing words he had just read, and, after a pause, forced himself to say, in a tolerably firm voice:

"I do not believe he is guilty."

The die was cast now. He had spoken a lie

in the service of yonder devil—a lie which he had repented even in the telling—and by that lie he was henceforth bound to stand.

"You don't believe he is guilty!" thundered Mr. Walford. "I should like to know then what you do believe. That the stick he left behind him was taken up to my room by ghosts, I suppose, or that I put it there myself perhaps, eh?"

"It may not have been his," said Mr. Fleming, tremulously. "All young men carry something of the kind; this one may have been left in your room days or weeks before, and never noticed till a search came to be made."

He felt how lame the theory was, but for the time his brain was too weak and confused to invent a better.

Mr. Walford was so wrathful that he could not yet trust himself to speak, and Mr. Puddicombe answered for him:

"Very kind of you to take such a lenient view of the incident, I am sure, but I'm afraid you won't find many to share it."

The little man shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and Mr. Fleming, feeling it incumbent upon him to back his opinion with some more solid argument, were it only to save himself from the imputation of imbecility, racked his brains anew.

"But I know he cannot have been in Linchester at the time the crime was committed," he said after a few moments' pause. "He left me intending to be back in London the same night."

"And don't you know he was not back in London the same night?" burst in Mr. Walford. "Don't you know he was seen leaving Linchester by the train that starts at two o'clock in the morning? Where have your eyes or ears been that you don't know that?"

The circumstance had not been stated in the meagre account which Mr. Fleming had read that morning, and for a moment the knowledge of it made him feel that any further attempt to combat a suspicion which there were so many facts to support was altogether useless. But suddenly an idea occurred to him, and he blurted forth, without giving himself time to consider:

"Then it is certain he cannot have done it. I was at the bank myself till two o'clock that morning, and left everything safe."

How he hated himself for the part he was playing! Another lie—a mean, pitiful, shabby lie—offered as a tribute to that man's power.

Mr. Walford stared.

"Nonsense, Fleming, you must be mistaken, I'm sure you must. Indeed, now that I think of

it, I know you are; your housekeeper told us she heard you come home at—at a quarter past one, wasn't it, Puddicombe?"

"A quarter past one," assented Mr. Puddicombe. "Yes, Mr. Fleming must be mistaken."

If he had had all his faculties about him he would have acquiesced in the hypothesis; but, knowing that he had lied, it seemed at the instant that to retreat from his statement would be to admit conscious deceit.

"I am not mistaken," he said persistently. "It was two o'clock when I came away, I am sure of it."

Mr. Walford looked staggered.

"Pooh! your watch is wrong," he replied at last. "It can't have been two, you know. Godfrey was out of Linchester by two."

"My watch is not wrong, I assure you," said Mr. Fleming. He took it out of his pocket to attest his assertion; but, having been from home the night before, he had forgotten to wind it up, and could only repeat that he was sure it was right two nights ago. "Besides," he added desperately, as Mr. Walford shook his head—"besides, it was striking two as I passed the cathedral on my way home."

"By the cathedral clock?" asked Mr. Puddicombe.

"Yes, by the cathedral clock."

"I can't understand it at all," said Mr. Walford after a pause, looking helplessly at his lawyer. "Then I suppose that fellow Godfrey can really have had nothing to do with it."

"It would seem so," said Mr. Puddicombe briefly. He hesitated for a moment, cleared his throat, and went on: "My dear sir, you will excuse me, I know, but do you not think that on so critical a day as this you are absenting yourself too long from the establishment of which you are the head? We can resume this inquiry another time. I see Mr. Fleming is quite knocked up with the long journey and the bad news; and after all we must remember that the credit of Walford and Co. is paramount to every other consideration."

The appeal was to Mr. Walford as a trumpet-note to an old war-horse.

"Yes, yes, yes," he cried, springing to his feet. "Just what I have been saying all day—what I should have acted on if you had left me to myself instead of plaguing me with your confounded lawyer nonsense. Let us be off, do you hear me? let us be off. If they ruin me it shall be before my face, damn it, not behind my back."

He caught up his hat and rushed out of the room, followed by the lawyer; and Mr. Fleming was left alone, to let his aching head fall wearily forward on his hands and ponder miserably on what he had done. He had known before—no man better—what it was to endure the pains of sorrow and remorse; but he had never felt before so utterly despicable and degraded as now. And then his temples were throbbing as though they would burst, and his lips were dry and parched, and his sight was dim; and with it all he was alone—no creature that cared for him near to minister comfort to fainting flesh or crushed spirit.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. PUDDICOMBE'S VIEWS.

MEANWHILE Mr. Puddicombe and his client were on their way towards the bank. There were few words exchanged between them, for Mr. Walford was too intent on hastening to his place of business to be in the mood for talking, and the lawyer was fully occupied with thoughts of his own. He roused himself, however, as they neared their destination, and, tucking his arm within that of Mr. Walford, gently restrained that gentleman as he was about to turn precipitately into the handsome modern portico which constituted the public entrance to the establishment.

"The private door, if you please, my dear sir. I have a few words I wish to say to you in your own room before we do anything else. Mr. Naggles is quite competent to attend to the bank in the meantime—he is indeed."

There was a brisk business-like air of decision in

the lawyer's manner which was irresistible; and before Mr. Walford could devise words to protest against the delay involved in the proposal, he found himself standing with his Mentor in front of the private door, waiting for Mr. Puddicombe's knock to be answered.

"I can't have my time wasted like this," he grumbled, shuffling restlessly with his feet. "I wish to Heaven you would let me alone. You are always having a few words to say to me."

"But not always words of so important a nature as those I have to say to you now, my dear sir, as you will find presently," said the little man. "Only go upstairs to your room, and you will agree with me, I am sure."

He gently propelled Mr. Walford into the house, the door being at that moment opened for them by Mrs. Grimble, and at once hurried him upstairs, remaining behind a few moments himself to receive a communication from his clerk, who was awaiting his return in the passage.

When, after a short delay, the lawyer found his way upstairs, and entered the comfortable apartment appropriated from time immemorial to the use of the head of the firm, Mr. Walford came forward impatiently to meet him, asking testily:

"Now then, what have you got to say? Out with it—I have no time to throw away."

Mr. Puddicombe shut the door, and looked cautiously round the room.

"We are alone?" he said mysteriously.

"Confound it, yes, of course we are alone. Say what you want to say and have done with it."

But Mr. Puddicombe did not seem in any hurry to have done with it. He seated himself with great composure, motioned Mr. Walford to sit down likewise, and then, after coughing once or twice by way of preface, began deliberately:

"Did you happen to notice a remark made by Mr. Fleming in that very important statement of his with reference to the hour at which he left the bank the other night? A remark to the effect that the cathedral clock was striking two as he passed it on his way home? Do you remember, my dear sir?"

"Of course I remember," cried Mr. Walford, his mind flying off at a tangent from the critical state of his business affairs to the equally exciting topic of his prospects of obtaining justice on the criminal who was the primary cause of the mischief. "And I want to ask you, Puddicombe, what do you think of it? I don't understand how Fleming can have been mistaken, you see, and yet, if he isn't, we have been on the wrong scent all along. It is enough to drive one crazy."

Mr. Puddicombe coughed again, and then answered:

"But I have reason to know that Mr. Fleming is mistaken—very strangely mistaken," he added, with a strong emphasis on the adverb. "I see you are not aware of it, my dear sir, but the cathedral clock was sent last week to London for repairs."

Mr. Walford opened his eyes, and stared at the lawyer in blank astonishment. Mr. Puddicombe's face was an expressive one, and he returned the gaze with such a queer significant look in his bright little eyes and about the corners of his shrewd tightly pursed-up mouth that even to Mr. Walford's unperceptive faculties it was evident that the little man meant a great deal more than he said.

"It was a lie then!" said the banker, bending forward eagerly to look into Mr. Puddicombe's face, and so excited that he almost panted for breath. "A lie was it? a lie?"

Mr. Puddicombe nodded solemnly in the affirmative.

"It looks very much like one, I am afraid," he said demurely. "Be calm, Mr. Walford, pray be calm."

"A lie! and what did he mean by it? I ask you, Puddicombe, what did he mean by it? By Heaven I will have it out. Make haste—what did he mean by it?"

Mr. Puddicombe shrugged his shoulders.

"You must understand that I am not in Mr. Fleming's confidence. He had some motive for misleading you, I suppose, but it is not for me to say positively what that motive was. In the same way, if you were to ask me what Mr. Fleming meant by leaving home on the morning of the robbery without previous notice given to you—a proceeding, I am told, quite at variance with his usual practice—and absenting himself from the bank for a whole day and a half at the busiest part of the year" . . . . .

"I see, I see!" interrupted Mr. Walford, his face purple with agitation, and his eyes unnaturally dilated. "I was an idiot not to have thought of it before. You think he did it, Puddicombe? you think he did it?"

"Hush!" said the little man with a nervous glance towards the door, "for goodness' sake not so loud. And you put it a great deal too strongly, my dear sir, a great deal. I never meant to say I thought that he had done it—certainly not. I only say (in the strictest professional confidence of course) that there are certain circumstances about the case which might not be incompatible with a theory that a second person—a person connected with the establishment—was concerned in it. These things are not generally attempted by one man having no assistance to look for from within. But

suppose two persons—one of them having been secreted all the evening in your room, the other having official possession of the key of the safe—suppose two persons were engaged in removing the property of the bank and were suddenly interrupted by the entrance of young Bates (you will observe that the room where the poor fellow was struck down was not that in which he usually worked); suppose this, or something like it, and all difficulty vanishes at once."

"If I thought it was so!" muttered Mr. Walford, biting his lip—"if only I thought it was so!"

"Mind, I am not asserting it was anything of the sort," said the lawyer warily. "I am only just trying to give you an idea of the kind of theory which it might occur to a suspicious person to construct on the circumstances of the case. Just as it might occur to a suspicious person, you know, that a journey to London would offer the most convenient means of disposing of the missing property."

"Of course, of course. Was I mad not to think of it before? And yet" . . . . .

"Oh! all this is very wild talk, I am sure. Mr. Fleming will be able to assign excellent reasons for all he has done, no doubt. Though I confess I am curious to learn how the key of the safe came to be

on the premises after his departure on that particular night. It was his usual practice to take it home with him, I believe?"

"Damn him, yes. But I will be revenged. If he has robbed me he need not look for mercy, for he shall have none. The treacherous plundering scoundrel! he shall have none."

"Hush, my dear sir, pray hush—I really cannot let you say these things. Mr. Fleming is a highly respectable gentleman whose character is and always has been—at least with the exception of a few youthful irregularities—completely irreproachable, and it is impossible to believe anything against him except on the strongest and most irrefragable evidence. I certainly could wish that he had not been, on his own showing, a friend and associate of that man Godfrey, who is proved to have been secreted upstairs on the night of the robbery, but" . . . .

"He shall have no mercy," repeated the other through his set teeth.

"But we must not attach too much importance to disadvantageous appearances. There is just one little circumstance more, however, which I think it right (without prejudice) to mention. You remember, perhaps, that letter which Mr. Fleming received while we were with him just now; it seemed to excite him a good deal, did you notice?"

"Yes, yes, I noticed," cried Mr. Walford. "And what do you think it was, Puddicombe? what do you think it was?"

"Of course that is more than I can say for certain. But, as you saw, my clerk was waiting for me downstairs as I came in—I had told him to keep me informed of whatever news might reach my office from the police—and it seems it has just been heard from Wittingham that a man exactly answering Godfrey's description entered a stationer's shop last night, where he asked for an envelope and pen and ink to write an address. The shop-woman's attention was excited by his strange manner, and on reading the account of our affair she came to the conclusion that the person she had seen could have been no other than Godfrey. Now I don't want to be uncharitable, but putting together the two facts, that the man Godfrey was writing a letter last night, and that Mr. Fleming received one this afternoon which from some cause or other evidently had the effect of greatly agitating him" . . . .

"It is as clear as the noon-day sun!" exclaimed Mr. Walford, bringing down his fist with furious vehemence on the table. "He is guilty, guilty—never tell me he is not guilty."

"I fear I cannot honestly do so, my dear sir," said Mr. Puddicombe, decorously turning up the

whites of his eyes as far as he was conveniently able. "Things look bad—very bad indeed, it must be confessed."

The lawyer was always cautious about committing himself to a positive opinion, but his case seemed strong enough now to allow him to dispense with reserve.

Meantime Mr. Walford's fury was at white heat; for a few moments words failed him in the violence of his passion.

"Arrest him!" he managed to articulate at last. "Arrest him. Instantly—do you hear?"

"We have evidence enough for it, certainly," said Mr. Puddicombe thoughtfully. "But" . . .

"Why the devil don't you do it then? Do you want him to finish ruining me outright? Clap him into prison at once—I will have no mercy."

"There is not the slightest reason why you should," said the lawyer, soothingly. "But there is a great deal of reason why we should proceed very cautiously. In the present critical state of your affairs it would hardly do for the public to learn that one of the partners of Walford's was in jail."

The banker was shaken for a moment, but recovered himself almost immediately.

"I don't care. I'll have justice if I have to beg my bread all my life afterwards."

"I admire your noble disinterestedness, my dear sir. But there is another reason, in the interests of justice itself, why the matter should be kept quiet for two or three days. It would be highly desirable if we could get a sight of a letter of this fellow Godfrey; for, not to say that it might make all the difference between catching him and not, it might contain evidence of a conclusive nature against the person to whom it was addressed. You understand, don't you?"

"If I had only known at the time!" muttered Mr. Walford. "But he must have taken care to burn it as soon as our backs were turned."

"That letter, very likely," said the lawyer. "But if we only keep our own counsel for a little time, and don't create a scandal which would be sure to reach Godfrey's ears, who knows but what he may write another? I think I shall be able to persuade the worthy housekeeper at Mr. Fleming's to give me an opportunity of inspecting any letters that may arrive for her master during the next day or two. If we want to get evidence to convict, that's the plan, depend upon it."

The argument evidently told with Mr. Walford.

"If I could be sure he would not try to get off in the meanwhile" . . . . he said hesitatingly.

"He won't, supposing we take proper care not to let him think he is suspected. But of course we

shall not be content without having him watched day and night—leave me to see to that."

"I may trust you to be careful, Puddicombe? Day and night—night and day?"

"You may trust me unreservedly. And in the mean time let me advise you to allow nothing to slip from you which may give him or others reason to suppose that you suspect him; you had better not excite yourself by seeing him at all if you can help it. It is fortunate, by the way, that he is not here this afternoon, and to-morrow I should recommend you to avoid him by staying at home. You will be cautious, Mr. Walford? promise me you will be cautious."

"Yes, yes," panted forth the banker, looking, however, as little like a cautious man as possible. "Only show me how to punish him, and I will do anything you want."

"In that case, my dear sir, I think I can guarantee to you the happiest results. Let us be circumspect, and we have got him in a cleft stick—absolutely in a cleft stick. Will you come home now? you must be ready for dinner by this time, and I see business hours are over for the day. I wonder how Mr. Naggles has been getting on."

The suggestion had the desired effect of changing the current of Mr. Walford's thoughts for the pre-

sent. He hurried downstairs to learn the result of the day's proceedings, and had the satisfaction of hearing that on the whole it was favourable—that is to say, the fate of the bank was yet uncertain. Notwithstanding that there had been a severe run, the immediately available funds were far from being exhausted. All was doubtful for the future, but the perils of that day at least had been tided over in safety.

CHAPTER VIII.

NATHANIEL HEARS NEWS.

"DEAR uncle Nat, I am glad you have been able to come early," said Jemima, rising to embrace her uncle as he entered the modest sitting-room lately taken by poor Bob on the strength of his increase of salary, and now occupied by Jemima and her youngest sister Anne, who had come to stay at Linchester in order to be near the hospital. "It somehow seems to do me good only to look at you. But the news is no better, uncle dear—I saw him this morning, and he is just the same. And they said, they said . . . . . Oh! my own darling uncle!"

She broke down in a fit of violent sobbing.

"I know," said Nathaniel, shaking his head sadly. "I have just been there myself, and they told me the same thing. But don't cry, my pet, don't cry; doctors may be wrong as well as other people."

More he dared not say in the way of comfort. This was the day after Mr. Fleming's return from

London—that is, more than two whole days and nights had passed away since poor Bob had been discovered lying speechless and insensible on the floor of the bank parlour—and still there was no sign of returning consciousness. In the meanwhile, what hope might have been gathered by his nearest and dearest from the fact that there had at least been no change for the worse was cruelly damped by the unfavourable verdict of the doctors, who, having committed themselves to the assertion that there was and could be no hope, stuck to it obstinately, and had repeated it to Jemima and her uncle that very morning.

"Oh! it is so dreadful!" sobbed Jemima. "But I seem to bear it better when you are with me, uncle. It is such a comfort to me to see you."

"Not more than it is to me to see you," said Nathaniel, stroking his niece's hand fondly as he sat down by her side. "I only wish it were possible for me to be always with you during this time, I am sure you know that, my dear."

He would indeed most thankfully have removed himself and the whole family to Linchester that they might hand-in-hand meet the blow which seemed to be impending over them; but he was bread-winner for too many to be able to abandon his usual avocations, and it had been settled that he should remain at Hernebridge, with Amelia to keep

house for him and to look after Tommy. He spent at Linchester, however, every moment that he could spare from his duties, and to-day had given his boys a half-holiday that he might come up immediately after morning school.

"I know you are next door to an angel, uncle Nat," responded Jemima through her tears. "When I think of all you have done for us, and all the trouble and worrit we have been to you" . . . .

"No, no, my dear girl, no," interrupted Nathaniel, making a clumsy attempt to dry her eyes with a huge cotton handkerchief produced from his own pocket. "If you come to that, I can only say I don't know what I should have done without you—upon my word and honour I don't. I'm very absent and stupid and all that, Jemima my dear, but I'm not so blind as not to see how hard you have worked to make me comfortable."

Jemima shook her head mournfully.

"If I was to scrub on my bended knees day and night all my life long, it wouldn't half reward you for all your goodness, uncle, or yet half express my feelings. But I try to make you comfortable, I do indeed, though I don't always succeed as I ought to." She choked down a rising sob, and added in a broken voice, "I hope Amelia don't boil your egg too hard, uncle. I told her you liked it soft, but she ain't got a bit of thought."

"Amelia manages everything very nicely indeed, my dear. She is a very good girl. There, my darling, don't cry."

"I know Amelia means well, uncle, but she ain't fit to be left to keep house," said Jemima dolefully. "It will come to her in time, perhaps, for after all she ain't much more than a child yet."

There was only a year or so of difference between the ages of Jemima and her second sister; but Jemima, looking down from the lofty height of her own experience, was apt unconsciously to give herself these matronly airs.

"And Tom—I know he's going with his face as black as a coal for want of somebody to wash it. He's quite well, I hope, the precious boy?"

"Quite well, my dear—that is, this morning. He was a little ailing yesterday through eating red currants off the bush in the garden, but he is quite himself again to-day."

Jemima's eyes flashed with something of their old fire.

"The naughty disobedient child that he is! And after me making him promise so faithfully he wouldn't touch one without leave all the time I was away. But only let him wait till I get back" . . . . She stopped herself suddenly, remembering under what circumstances she would probably see home again, and burst into a tempest of

passionate sorrow, rocking herself backwards and forwards in her chair and exclaiming: "Oh my poor Bob! Oh! my poor dear boy!"

Anne set up a dolorous howl of sympathy, while Nathaniel, quite unable to withstand the spectacle of so much grief, was obliged to put his cotton handkerchief into requisition for his own eyes, and for some minutes the three had a hearty cry in unison. Jemima was the first to recover herself, roused into new energy by the strong utilitarian principle of her nature.

"But uncle Nat, dear," she began as soon as she could speak with tolerable plainness, "I've something to say to you about business; I oughtn't to have put it off so long only I couldn't help being overcome by seeing you. Do you know, uncle, I hear Walford's is in a very bad way. Some people say it's going to break."

"Yes, my dear, so I have heard."

"Then don't you think, uncle, you'd better go and see Mr. Walford about poor dear Bob's salary? There was a quarter due two or three days before—before this happened, you know"—here there was another break in her voice. "And—and it's thirty pounds, uncle, and we can't afford to lose it."

Jemima was not of a naturally mercenary disposition, but her premature housewifely experience had taught her lessons on the value of money which

even the sorrow of the present moment could not efface from her mind. So she looked at her uncle beseechingly, and said:

"I think you ought to see about it, uncle."

"If you wish it, my dear, of course," said Nathaniel hesitatingly, for the task was not a pleasant one for a man of his temperament. "But—but I hope Mr. Walford won't be offended about it."

"More shame for him if he is," said Jemima with a touch of indignation in her voice; "the poor dear boy worked hard enough for it, I'm sure. Dear uncle Nat, I'm very sorry to have to ask you, for I know you don't like it, but there's nobody else to do it, you see. And we can't afford to lose it, uncle. Look at the expense all this has been to us, and—and—and will be, perhaps," she added with a convulsive sob, as visions of black stuff dresses and crape trimmings rose before her mind's eye.

Against an appeal thus backed Nathaniel could not argue further.

"Very well, my dear," he said, with a painful effort to screw up his courage to the required point. "Would you like me to go now?"

"If you please, uncle. I am so sorry to trouble you, but it would never do to lose thirty pounds, you know."

"Certainly, my love, you are quite right. Good-bye for the present, both of you."

He took up his hat and stick, and, having kissed his two nieces tenderly, set off at once on his mission.

A few minutes' walking brought him to the bank, which he found presenting an ominous appearance—not, however, quite so marked as on the preceding day—of being unusually busy. He inquired for the head of the firm, but was told that he had not come to business that morning. Mr. Walford had in truth been detained at home by the persuasions of the wily Mr. Puddicombe, who feared nothing so much in the interests of the bank as allowing his client to be seen in public in his present excited state. On finding that the visitor was poor Mr. Bates's uncle, Grimble was gracious enough to say that Mr. Fleming was at his desk as usual; but remembering the hostility which Mr. Fleming had so lately expressed towards him, Nathaniel did not think fit to accept Grimble's implied offer to take in his name, and started at once for Mr. Walford's private residence a mile or two distant from the town.

On arriving there he had the satisfaction of finding that his name served as a sufficient passport to the presence of the master of the house, and he was immediately ushered into a study, or small library, where the banker was sitting unoccupied and alone. For Mr. Puddicombe, having other clients to attend to, had been obliged reluctantly to leave Mr.

Walford to himself for an hour or two that afternoon, first extracting his promise not to leave home, above all not to put himself in the way of Mr. Fleming or any of the bank customers. Thus thrown upon his own devices, Mr. Walford was spending the interval of solitude in such a state of feverish suspense and impatience as to make the arrival of any visitor against whom he had not been warned a positive relief to him.

"Well, Mr. Digges," he said, advancing eagerly towards the schoolmaster, "and what have you come to say to me? Any change in your nephew since the morning? Let me see—young Bates is your nephew, I think?"

"Yes," said Nathaniel hoarsely—"my poor sister's son, and almost as dear to me as if he were my own."

"I am very sorry for you," said Mr. Walford, viewing Nathaniel's evident emotion with a sympathy which, it may be feared, would not have been quite so keen but for the circumstance that the murderous assailant of poor Bob had been also the plunderer of the bank. "And very sorry for your nephew too," he went on, with more cordiality than was usual with him. "He was a fine fellow, Mr. Digges, a very fine fellow indeed, and I only wish he was present to hear me say so."

Before the robbery Bob had been too much of a

favourite with Mr. Fleming to stand very high in the good graces of the naturally jealous senior partner, but it was wonderful how his figure had risen in Mr. Walford's estimation since he had been made a martyr in the cause of Mr. Walford's property.

"You are very kind to say so," said Nathaniel in a choking voice. "I'm afraid he'll never get well to thank you for it, poor dear boy."

He thought how he had lately seen poor Bob lying pale and senseless at the hospital, with ghastly linen bandages enveloping his head and rendering yet more pinched and unnatural the expression of the familiar features once beaming with health and good-humour, and, as he remembered it, could not keep the tears from overflowing his eyes.

"Never mind," said Mr. Walford, perceiving something of Nathaniel's distress, and seizing on the topic of consolation most grateful to his own feelings. "Never mind, he shall be revenged—properly revenged, if ever anybody in this world was. They have murdered him, but I'll make them pay for it, damn them, see if I don't make them pay for it."

"Poor fellow!" said Nathaniel sadly. "I think that's almost the last thing he'd care about."

"But I care about it!" bawled Mr. Walford, excited almost beyond the power of self-control by

the subject thus broached, and beginning to stride fiercely up and down the floor. "And what's more, I'll do it—am doing it now, thank Heaven, though it's nothing yet to what it will be. What, don't you know the fellow's watched day and night—watched every step he takes? He's as much mine as though he were in Linchester jail already."

"He is found then!" said Nathaniel, not without some natural agitation at the idea of the capture of Bob's assailant. "I had not heard of it before. Francis Godfrey is found!"

"Francis Godfrey! no," said Mr. Walford, continuing his walk with more impetuous stride than ever. "But Gilbert Fleming is, and shall be taken good care of, I can tell you."

"Mr. Fleming!" exclaimed Nathaniel.

He looked at Mr. Walford in blank amazement; for a while he thought that the banker had taken leave of his senses.

"Yes, Fleming, I said Fleming," rejoined Mr. Walford, only too glad to find an opportunity of unbosoming himself to one on whom, as a friend and relative of the victim, he thought he could depend for making common cause with him. "Fleming did it, or helped to do it—I've got proofs as clear as daylight."

Nathaniel gazed at the speaker in horror-struck wonderment. Mr. Walford, excited as he was, did

not look otherwise than sane, and yet not for a moment could the schoolmaster bring himself to believe that Gilbert Fleming, Maud's father, could be guilty of such a crime as that thus distinctly imputed to him.

"Mr. Fleming! it is impossible—impossible."

"It is true!" vociferated Mr. Walford. "What is he hand and glove with that villain Godfrey for, if they are not accomplices? And if you had heard the string of lies he told us yesterday to prove an *alibi* for the fellow! Puddicombe saw through it at once. But he shall suffer for it, trust me for that—I have not been robbed and ruined by my own partner for nothing."

A gleam of light flashed across Nathaniel's mind; he thought he understood now how Mr. Fleming might seem guilty without being so.

"You are mistaken, I am sure you must be mistaken," he stammered. "Mr. Fleming may be afraid of what may happen . . . . . in short, he may—may have reasons for wishing to protect this man, and yet" . . . . .

"Reasons! of course—who doubts he has reasons? And reasons for turning as white as a sheet when a letter from his accomplice is put into his hands before my very eyes—reasons enough, I'll be bound. The damned treacherous scoundrel!"

Nathaniel dared not explain his meaning

further, and could only falter out, in agitation as deep if not as violently manifested as the banker's own :

"No, no, Mr. Walford, do not believe it. It cannot, cannot be."

"But I will believe it. Would you have me disbelieve the evidence of my own senses? I tell you I heard the things he said, and they were lies—black infernal lies. And besides, as Puddicombe says, there must have been two at the business—of course there must. And then why did he go to London the next day, and why . . . . There is enough to prove him guilty twenty times over," summed up Mr. Walford, obliged to pause for a moment in sheer breathlessness.

Nathaniel was silent; words failed him in his dismay.

"And he shall rue it—rue it if ever mortal rued anything. He is triumphing now, I dare say, but perhaps he wouldn't if he knew of the policemen in plain clothes who are keeping watch over him at this very moment. He little thinks that he hasn't stirred a step or drawn a breath since yesterday that they haven't been at his heels or waiting at his door."

Had things indeed gone so far as this? Nathaniel was too much shocked for an instant to be able to reply; and just as he was about to

make a fresh attempt to argue Mr. Walford out of the belief which had taken such hold of him, a knock was heard at the front door, and the banker whispered hastily, with a somewhat frightened look:

"That's Puddicombe. Not a word of this before him, mind—I don't know what he wouldn't say if he thought I had told you. Stop till we get Fleming arrested—and then we may speak of it as loud as we please. It can't be more than a day or two first, and may be immediately; we are only waiting to see if he gets another letter from that fellow Godfrey, and damn me if I'll wait much longer."

At that moment a brisk elastic step made itself heard on the landing without, and immediately afterwards the door opened and Mr. Puddicombe appeared.

"Here I am, my dear sir, as you see, once more released and at your service," said the little man, bustling into the room. "Ah! you have a visitor, I perceive. Pray sit down again, sir, I beg you won't think of moving on my account," he added graciously, seeing Nathaniel in the act of taking up his hat and stick.

But Nathaniel was bent on hurrying away at once. His senses were reeling under the intelligence that Maud's father was in danger so imminent

as Mr. Walford's last words had implied; and he felt himself incapable of coherent speech. As for the object of his visit, his agitation had effectually driven it out of his head; and, having taken hasty leave of Mr. Walford, he quitted the house, in complete forgetfulness of what had brought him there.

So Mr. Fleming was in peril of arrest on a charge of robbery, and, only too probably, of murder—ay, and perhaps, if he could not disprove the suspicions raised by his own words and acts, of suffering the full legal penalties of his presumed guilt! And all the while Mr. Fleming did not know his own danger; was unwittingly working at the books of the man who was his bitter and remorseless foe, who was hiring policemen in plain clothes to dog his footsteps, who was greedily seeking evidence against his liberty and his life. There was something in the idea inexpressibly repugnant to Nathaniel's feelings. He had never liked Mr. Fleming, and had never had reason to like him; but even apart from the circumstance that Maud had loved, and still did not cease to love, this man as her father, Nathaniel was a magnanimous enemy, and Mr. Walford's mode of procedure revolted him as being unspeakably mean and ungenerous. It would have so appeared in his eyes even had he held Mr. Fleming guilty; then how much more, believing as

he did in his innocence! For Nathaniel never thought of doubting that innocence for a moment. He knew, what none other in Linchester knew save himself, the fatal secret which placed Mr. Fleming's honour and reputation at the mercy of Francis Godfrey, and thus readily divined the process by which suspicion of the greater crime had been unconsciously incurred in a desire to avert exposure of the less.

And, this being so, a strong feeling took possession of him of pity, almost of sympathy, for the unsuspecting man for whom so terrible a surprise was being prepared. His first impulse was to go to him at once and give him notice of his danger, but he remembered the violence and unreasonableness of all Mr. Fleming's aversions, and foresaw that he would either refuse altogether to hear the counsels of a supposed enemy, or would be moved by them to persist more obstinately than ever in the line of conduct against which they warned him. An anonymous letter was the next device occurring to Nathaniel's mind; but this would not avail either, for had he not just been given to understand that Mr. Fleming's correspondence was intercepted? It seemed, then, that he could do nothing for the unhappy man he wished to serve but leave him to the fate which chance and Mr. Walford might have in store for him. And yet

what would Maud say when she heard that he had done nothing?

And here Nathaniel was assailed by a new question — a question that for a while tortured him with doubt and perplexity. Ought he or ought he not to tell Maud of her father's danger? He had passed a solemn promise to keep her informed of all that affected Mr. Fleming's health or happiness; but did that promise bind him to plunge her into possibly unnecessary anguish by telling her, before the result was determined, the terrible tidings he had learned to-day? And this at a time too when, as he felt assured, she must be enjoying comparative happiness and peace of mind; for her last letter had informed him of the invitation to Ilscote, and he knew—few better—how sweetly Lady Rosamond could charm away the dreary sense of care and poverty. He could not bear the thought of disturbing Maud in her newly-found asylum by inflicting on her so cruel a wound as he felt this news must cause.

He had almost fixed himself in this conclusion when it occurred to him with what ten-fold violence she would feel the blow he so ardently desired to spare her if the first intimation of her father's danger was conveyed to her, not through a tenderly worded letter from a friend, but through the

medium of a newspaper paragraph containing the announcement of his arrest on a capital charge. For such an arrest, if it were made, would infallibly be reported with full-length particulars, as the grand event of the day, in all the newspapers of the country. To torture such as this he could not, would not, expose her unprepared; and he resolved to write to her at once telling all he knew. Possibly she might be able to suggest some way of putting her father on his guard (Nathaniel had boundless faith in the resources of her girlish wisdom); but however that might be, it was right and necessary that she should know everything, and know it she should forthwith.

He found himself outside the door of Bob's lodgings as he had come to this decision, and, entering hastily, told Jemima that he had had no opportunity of executing his commission, and that for the present he could give no further attention to the subject, having a very important letter to write in time for the first post. And Jemima, though greatly wondering, was too good a girl, and had too much confidence in her uncle, to press him with questions on a subject on which he was evidently not willing to be communicative; and, having provided him with writing materials, left him to himself by retreating with Anne into the adjoining bed-

room. Thus it came to pass that by that afternoon's post a letter left Linchester for Ilscote, setting forth—gently and tenderly, but still in the main accurately—the gist of the conversation which had been held that morning in Mr. Walford's villa.

CHAPTER IX.

TO THE RESCUE.

AT dusk in the evening of the following day, a lady, her features closely covered by a thick veil, but with a girlish slightness of figure which betokened that she was very young to be travelling alone, came forth from the Linchester railway station, one of the first to leave it among a number of newly-arrived passengers. It was Maud Fleming, on her way to her father's house. She had come to give him warning of his peril, since there was none else who would or could.

Nathaniel's letter had reached her that morning, and its tidings, finding her as they did absolutely unprepared—in her peaceful retreat at Ilscote she had not even heard of Francis Godfrey's crime—had made her very heart thrill with fear and tender solicitude. To her terrified apprehension the extent and imminence of her father's danger were magnified tenfold, and her entire nature melted towards

him with yearning pity and affection as the unsuspecting object of a foul and traitorous conspiracy, aiming at nothing less than his judicial murder. But he should be saved, he should be saved; with her whole heart and soul she resolved that he should be saved—if at least the utmost efforts of one who was ready to do all and dare all in his service could be of power to save him. He should know of his peril ere he slept that night; and if it was too late for him to defeat his enemies by unsaying what he had said in his anxiety to divert suspicion from the real criminal, he should find her ready to give him what help she could to fly from them. She had read of schemes of escape being planned and brought to a happy issue on behalf of prisoners quite as jealously guarded as those policemen in plain clothes they told her of could possibly guard her father, and in none of these could more unstinted measure of zeal and devotion have been demanded from the captive's friends than she was prepared to expend in the cause of Gilbert Fleming. And then had she not a faithful auxiliary, one who might be depended on to any extent, in the person of Nathaniel Digges? Save him! oh yes! she might surely without presumption hope that it would be granted to her to save him. And should it indeed have been decreed otherwise, so much the more necessary was it that she should go to him, and, if

he would let her, help him to meet and to bear the worst.

A terrible sacrifice she had made in order to come thus quickly to his aid, and yet one which, keenly as she felt it, she never thought of grudging. She had left Ilscote for his sake—Ilscote, where she had found a friend whom her lonely heart clung to as a miser's to a recovered treasure—and had left it too with an unexplained haste and suddenness which she feared could not but be set down to ingratitude, or perhaps even worse. When Nathaniel's letter had arrived, Lady Rosamond was not in the house, having just gone out on a visit of charity to a poor neighbour, and Maud could not have waited for her return without a delay that would have made it impossible to reach Linchester that day; so that her hurried departure had been abrupt enough to to look almost like flight. A few hastily written words she had, indeed, left behind her, earnestly declaring that she had reasons for her conduct which, though not at liberty to disclose them, she was not ashamed of, and imploring Lady Rosamond to believe the best of her. But she could hardly persuade herself that the most indulgent of friends would accept so imperfect an excuse for her strange and unexplained behaviour; while the icy severity with which, after the first surprise, her tearful leave-taking had been received by Lady Blanche,

prepared her for finding the most unfavourable constructions put upon her motives. The idea of having forfeited a kindness and esteem so precious to her as Lady Rosamond's caused her unspeakable pain; and all through that day's long and miserable journey the question how yonder beloved friend would judge her had ever and anon recurred with torturing pertinacity, holding possession of her mind alternately with distressing apprehensions of the change that might within a few hours have taken place in her father's affairs. And yet, much as she had suffered in thus giving up Lady Rosamond for her father, she did not for a moment repent her choice. Was it not her duty to give up everything for him? She had read her duty thus formerly when she had forsaken him because she thought that she was a clog and encumbrance upon him; and she read her duty thus now when she was returning to him because she thought that he had need of her. The fear of injuring him had sent her away; the hope of serving him had brought her back; and neither then nor now did she regret the sacrifices that for his sake she made.

She had not been often in Linchester during her short residence at the Grange, and did not therefore incur much danger of being recognised as she glided through its quaint streets in the gathering dusk of the summer evening. She knew this, and

yet felt very fearful nevertheless, stealing along with her veil drawn closely over her face, and hardly daring to turn her head right or left. Only once on the way did she pause and half raise her veil with a wistful look, as though longing to see and hear all that she could. This was when she passed the hospital where, as Nathaniel's letter had informed her, poor Bob was lying, or had been lying yesterday, mortally injured. There was a little knot of people standing talking under the portico, and her heart swelled painfully as she thought that perhaps the tidings of the hapless lad's death had called them thither. She longed to ask if there was any change in his state, but dared not run the risk of attracting attention, and after a momentary pause of uncertainty passed hastily on.

She pressed forward with increased speed, and presently found herself turning into the dull old-fashioned street whither, more than a year ago, she had once coaxed her father to take her in order that she might see the house which had been his home during her school-days, little thinking then that it was ever to be his home again. As she recognised the dismal red-brick architecture whose gloom she remembered denouncing on that occasion, she again raised her veil slightly, and looked timorously round for signs of those terrible policemen in plain clothes of whom Nathaniel's letter had spoken. But as far

as the fading day-light showed her, she herself was at that moment the only passer-by in the deserted street—so deserted that, but for the hum of traffic in the busy thoroughfare beyond, it might have belonged to a city of the dead. A dreadful misgiving crossed her. Was it only because her father was still absent at business that the spies were not here to-night? or could it be that his arrest had relieved them from the necessity of further watching?

Trembling from head to foot at the idea thus conjured up, she ascended the door-step of the house that she knew to be her father's, and knocked a low faltering knock. The door was presently opened by Mrs. Badgett, who stared with undisguised astonishment at sight of the new-comer—not because she had any notion who the stranger was, for Maud's features were entirely unknown to her, but because the apparition of a lady visitor on her master's threshold was an absolutely unprecedented phenomenon.

"Can—can I see Mr. Fleming?" asked Maud in a stifled voice.

"Which Mr. Fleming ain't come home yet, miss, but if so be as there's any message, I shall be very glad to give it," replied Mrs. Badgett, with a due mixture of caution and affability.

So at all events it appeared that he was still left

ostensibly at liberty, at least as far as this woman knew! Maud breathed more freely, and rejoined in steadier accents:

"I should like to wait if you please. My business with Mr. Fleming is very important."

Mrs. Badgett seemed to have some doubts as to the propriety of admitting a stranger into her master's house, but half-a-crown slipped into her hand at this juncture had a magical effect in charming away her scruples, and the visitor was admitted without further delay.

"This way if you please, miss," said Mrs. Badgett, conducting her upstairs to Mr. Fleming's sitting-room. "It's rather a darkish room at this time of the evening, but I'll have master's lamp lit for you in half a minute."

Rather a darkish room it certainly was; a dull room at the best of times, with its narrow windows and gloomy look-out on the dingy red-brick houses that stood on the opposite side of the way and blocked out air and light; more dull than ever as seen in the twilight of this fine summer evening, so clear and cloudless elsewhere, so grey and sombre here. Maud remembered the pleasant study at the Grange in the adornment of which she had been wont to take so much pride, and could scarcely imagine her father sitting and working in this dismal apartment with none to speak to him a word

of encouragement or affection. But he did sit and work here nevertheless; the mute tokens of occupation were present showing that he did, and making her very heart-strings vibrate as she gradually realised how near she was to him. For yonder—on the table of which one end was taken up by a large tray with a small tea-pot and solitary cup and saucer forlornly standing thereon—was the well-remembered desk at which she had so often seen him write in his study at the Grange, on which in his absence she had so often deposited a carefully arranged bouquet of her own gathering; yonder, too, on the mantel-shelf was the old-fashioned time-piece which she had vainly tried to persuade him to replace by one of more modern manufacture. The sight of these familiar objects dimly discerned through the dusk caused the blood to rush tumultuously through her veins; she longed more than ever to cast herself at her father's feet and tell him that, unless he spurned her from him, she would never leave him more. But where was he? and why came he not? Was it possible that any evil had befallen him?

"Is not Mr. Fleming later than usual this evening?" she tremulously inquired of Mrs. Badgett, who, after a good deal of fumbling, had just succeeded in striking a light.

"Well yes, I think he is a trifle, miss; that is,

considering he ain't sent to say he is to be extra late. Which he is often a deal later than this, in coorse, but then he is pretty well sure to let you know, and only right too, seeing it ain't pleasant to have your tea-things littering about all evening and sitting up to all hours of the night perhaps, through not liking to go to bed without leave."

"He is later than usual to-night then?"

"Which there's no denying he is, miss. But he won't be much longer now, I shouldn't think; leastways if he is, his tea will be as cold as an icicle."

By this time Mrs. Badgett had got the lamp fairly lighted and set upon the table, surmounted, however, by a large shade which she had put on it by force of habit, and which rendered the greater part of the room, if possible, rather more lugubrious than before she had commenced operations. This done, she drew down the blind, dropped a curtsey to the strange lady, and departed, leaving Maud sitting trembling in a corner of the ill-lighted apartment, anxiously counting the seconds as they were ticked forth by the clock on the chimney-piece, and wondering what it could be that made her father so late that night.

CHAPTER X.

CONQUERED AT LAST.

WILL he never come? will he never come? she asked herself as the seconds ticked monotonously on and still her father had not returned. The last grey gleams of daylight slowly faded away in the street without, and the minute-hand of the time-piece gradually crept on till it had described almost a complete circle since she had begun to watch it; and still she sat alone, listening with straining ears and bated breath for the familiar knock she so longed to hear, and growing faint with fear and anxiety when she found that it came not.

At length a sound reached her from below that electrified her with new hope—not indeed that which she was listening for, but the click of a key being fitted into the lock of the street door. And immediately afterwards a step that she knew (ah! how well she knew it!) crossed the hall and began to ascend the stairs.

Her anxiety for her father's safety had hitherto been too absorbing to leave room for a thought of aught beside; and now the idea of being on the point of meeting him face to face—him by whom she had been for months counted dead—rushed upon her with overpowering suddenness. A strange dizziness came over her, and as she rose to her feet she found herself so weak that she had to stand leaning against her chair for support.

The footsteps had come very near now—were pausing on the landing outside—and Maud, fixing her eyes eagerly on the door, felt her heart almost stand still with the intensity of expectation. In a moment more the handle turned, the door slowly opened, and on the threshold appeared a tall commanding figure which, in spite of the obscurity caused by the lamp-shade, she recognised at once as that of Gilbert Fleming.

Her first impulse was to throw herself into his arms, but, remembering that he was absolutely unprepared for seeing her, she checked herself, and, uncertain how to announce her presence, remained standing in the darkened corner, faint and trembling.

Meanwhile, with slow weary step Mr. Fleming advanced to the table, and sank down on a chair that stood near it, in such a manner that the side of his face only was turned towards Maud. The

light of the lamp shone full upon him now, and with a thrill of tender pity she saw that he was looking pale and worn—paler and more worn than she had ever known him. Presently he sighed; such a heavy long-drawn sigh it was that she could refrain no longer, and, bending intently forward—she was too much afraid of startling him to venture a step nearer—she softly breathed the word:

"Father!"

With a convulsive movement he turned his head, and his eyes looked full into the dark corner where Maud, with clasped hands, stood pale and motionless as a statue. For a moment he gazed with parted lips and starting eye-balls, then turned away and covered his face with his hands, while his strongly built frame was visibly shaken by a violent tremor which seemed to communicate itself to every fibre.

She looked on in dismay. She still dared not approach, and yet what should she do to tranquillise him?

"Father—dearest father!" she murmured again.

He moved slightly, and answered in a hollow voice, still with averted eyes:

"Why do you mock me? You would not have mocked me when you were living."

She saw now how it was, and made a few faltering steps forward.

"Papa, dear papa, look at me, and you will see that you are mistaken. It is your child, your own living child, that has come back to you. Oh! papa, do you not understand? I let them think me dead that I might keep your secret. You understand now, papa, do you not?"

He raised his head from his hands, and let his eyes rest on her—doubtfully and vacantly at first, but with a look of gradually growing comprehension. She ventured now to come close up to where he sat, and, sinking on her knees before him, seized one of his hands, and pressed it to her bosom.

"Oh! papa, my own darling papa, forgive me all that I have made you suffer. I ought not to have left you perhaps, but I thought—I thought . . . It was for your sake, for your sake indeed, or I could never have done it. But it is over now, papa —I am with you again, and will never, never, leave you unless you bid me go."

Her heart was too full for further utterance, and, releasing his hand, she bowed her head downwards till her brow rested on his knee, and thus waited trembling for him to speak and tell her whether or not she was welcome. For a long time all was silence, and neither sound nor motion came even to show that he had heard her. But at last she felt his hands straying, as it were with the action of a blind man's, over her head, apparently to make sure

that she was really there in flesh and blood before him; and then she heard a tremulous voice say, almost in a whisper:

"God be thanked that He has done this!"

A flash of rapturous joy shot through her soul, and she looked up eagerly.

"Papa, my own papa—you are glad to have me with you again?"

She had risen, and stood with her arm thrown round his neck and her cheek pressed lovingly against his while she asked the question.

"Yes, glad—very, very glad."

And as he spoke Maud felt her disengaged hand clasped tightly in that of her father, and found her cheek wet with tears not her own.

It was long ere either spoke again. After a while Mr. Fleming raised her head from his shoulder to gaze with perplexed questioning look into her face; it seemed that not even yet could he quite bring himself to believe that she was actually restored to him.

"It is not a dream surely," he muttered, smoothing the hair from her forehead with his finger, "and still . . . . Tell me, where have you been, where do you come from? I hope it is not a dream, but I understand nothing yet. Where do you come from?"

"I was at Ilscote this morning, dear papa—a

village near Grantwick, that is—and have been travelling all day to come to you. I have been living at Grantwick almost ever since I left you. Oh! I am able to explain everything; you shall soon find that it is no dream."

She looked up with a re-assuring smile. But he did not seem to notice it; he was pondering as one who strives to remember something.

"Ilscote," he said musingly, "Ilscote—I should know that name. Stay, did I not hear that that woman had gone to live at Ilscote—that woman who killed my wife, that" . . . .

"Hush, papa, oh! pray hush," cried Maud, horror-struck at the expression of vindictive hatred that passed over her father's countenance as he thought of the friend she so loved and venerated. "You are mistaken in her—believe me you are. And I am sure you will not judge her harshly any more when you hear how kind she has been to me."

No sooner had the words left her lips than Maud was conscious that they had made a strange difference in his feelings towards her. The hand which had been holding hers suddenly relaxed its grasp, and, almost as though he were recoiling from her, he disengaged himself from the loving embrace in which she sought to detain him.

"You have been with *her!*" he exclaimed, while

something like a shudder quivered through his frame. "With her!"

The thought of thus losing his love just at the moment when she seemed to have found it overwhelmed her with dismay.

"Oh! papa, do not be angry," she exclaimed, bursting into tears. "I did not seek her of my own accord, indeed."

In a few hurried words she told how she had come to be thrown into the society of Lady Rosamond, sobbing forth in conclusion: "And I liked her without knowing it; I could not help it. But forgive me, say that you forgive me."

He looked at her as though surprised at her emotion.

"Forgive you! Oh yes! I will forgive you anything. But never *her*"—he added fiercely, with a new access of passion—"never her. Remember, I will never forgive her."

She dared not expostulate with him in his wrath, only too glad that it did not extend to herself.

"You are not angry with me any more then, dear papa? And you will give me your hand again, will you not?"

"Oh yes! I will do whatever you wish," he answered, and put forth his hand once more to take hold of hers. But the broken charm had not been

made whole again, Maud knew that—heard it in the unimpassioned tones of his voice, so familiar yet so different from what they had been a few minutes before, felt it in the cold unresponsive touch of his hand, submitting itself to her caresses as during the old days at the Grange, not answering them with the tender reciprocation which had been expressed in its clasp so lately. What was there in the name of Lady Rosamond that, like some evil spell, it seemed to have dried up the sources of her father's love just as it was about to spring forth?

For a minute she was unable to speak in her grief and disappointment, and Mr. Fleming was the first to break silence.

"You seem to have been very happy yonder. I wonder you cared for returning to me."

The speech, cruelly stinging though she felt it to be, recalled what she had almost forgotten in the tumult of her emotions, and, making a great effort to conquer them, she hastened to perform her task as steadily as she could.

"I came to tell you that you are in danger, and to help you if I can. Bad men are in a conspiracy against you, papa, but we will defeat them yet."

"Danger — conspiracy" — he said, with a perplexed air—"I do not understand."

As briefly as possible she told him of the suspicions harboured against him, the measures

taken to prevent his escape, the spies set upon his movements. He listened with evident surprise, but with complete tranquillity. Apparently he felt no alarm, nor even uneasiness, as to the consequences.

"So!" he remarked when she had finished, with something of a contemptuous smile on his face. "This is why Walford has not been molesting me with more questions. I thought it was strange they should have been willing to leave me so much at peace."

To see him take it so quietly increased Maud's fears rather than diminished them; she was afraid that he was going desperately to bid defiance to his enemies.

"But papa, you will try to save yourself, will you not? Think of your danger, darling; oh! do think of your danger."

"It is over already—that danger at least," said Mr. Fleming, with the same composure as before. "They cannot make me out guilty now, let them try as they will; I have a witness in my favour whose evidence is conclusive."

"A witness! who?" she asked eagerly.

"Robert Bates himself. He gave signs of consciousness for the first time this morning, and since then has been doing so well that he is now considered out of danger."

"Poor Bob!" cried Maud delighted. "And have you seen him, papa?"

"Yes, I have just come from the hospital. He was quite sensible, and told me that he had already had a long visit from Walford and his lawyer. I wondered at the time to hear that they had been so prompt, but I understand now. They must have been sadly disappointed with his evidence."

"And poor Bob will really get well again. Oh! papa, I am so glad."

And for a moment Maud was happy. The news of Bob's recovery and her father's safety had transported her out of herself with rejoicing. But there was no sign of rejoicing about Mr. Fleming, and she checked herself.

"I am glad too," he said slowly. "At least I hope I am—I should hate myself if I thought I was not, for I liked the lad better than I liked anybody. But I am afraid that his life, though it may mean safety for me in one sense, means perdition in another. If they find Francis Godfrey, that boy's evidence will prove him guilty beyond the power of the ablest lawyers in the land to help him; and if he is proved guilty, he will not suffer without dragging me down with him in his own ruin. He has promised, and such a promise he will not fail to keep. He will tell all that he knows, and my name will be the by-word of Linchester."

He pressed his temples with both hands, as though to relieve an inward pain, and made a few turns to and fro, apparently forgetting Maud's very presence in his feverish apprehension of what the future was to bring forth.

With something like despair she looked at him as he strode past her without even a glance in her direction. Alas! was the spell quite broken? A few minutes ago, when he had clasped her hand so warmly and she had felt his tears (surely tears of gladness) on her cheek, he had seemed to be entirely hers, so that there could be no room in his heart for sorrow or rejoicing with which she was not associated, no room in his mind for any thought that was not of her. And now she was a stranger once more, allowed indeed to witness the agitation into which he was thrown by his private cares, but not invited to bring solace, evidently altogether unthought of as a comforter.

He was roused from his reverie by a tap at the door, and went to open it.

"What is it?" he inquired briefly.

"Oh! if you please, sir," replied the voice of Mrs. Badgett, "here's Mr. Grimble downstairs a waiting to speak to you. He says he has just heard news he knows you'll like, and he's come a purpose to tell you."

"Say I shall be with him directly."

He waited till Mrs. Badgett had retired, and then went down, leaving Maud sadly wondering why Lady Rosamond should be so dear to her and yet so hated by her father.

He returned in a few minutes, almost reeling as he entered, and with so ghastly a pallor overspreading his countenance that Maud could hardly restrain a cry of alarm.

"Papa! What has happened? Are you ill?"

He staggered towards a chair and sat down, wiping the moisture from his forehead.

"It is as I thought—I am lost beyond redemption. Francis Godfrey has been captured—given up by a man with whom he had taken refuge—they are bringing him to Linchester jail to-night. I am crushed for ever."

He rested his chin upon his hands, and sat gazing before him with a blank stony expression of despair. He had never looked at Maud, never seemed to think of asking her for solace, appeared scarcely conscious of her presence even when he answered her. But her love was not to be thus repressed.

"Papa!" she murmured, laying her hand gently on his shoulder—"dear papa, will you not let me comfort you? Is it nothing to you that I am with you, that it would be the happiness of my life to try to make you forget your troubles? Oh! papa

darling, won't you believe me?" she asked appealingly, as he shook his head.

"You would forego all the happiness of your life to do me service; I know that," he answered coldly yet gently. "You have proved it by what you have done to-day. But I have deserved nothing at your hands, and I will not impose on your sense of duty. Go back to where you were so happy; you will find a ready welcome there, I do not doubt, when it is known that you have been rejected here."

A sudden light illumined Maud's understanding at the words. She passed her arm round her father's neck, and laid her cheek once more against his as she whispered:

"Oh! dearest, don't you understand that I am happier beside you than anywhere else in the whole world? Don't you know that I love you, papa? not because it is my duty, but because—because I do love you, love you dearly and with my whole heart, and shall go on so loving you to the last."

The hard stony look gradually melted from his face; the muscles of his mouth began to work nervously, and there was a quivering motion about his eyelids as he murmured:

"Is it true? is it true?"

"True! yes, a thousand times true." She threw herself at his feet, and, resting her folded hands on

his knees, commenced pleading as one would plead for the most precious of boons. "And you will love me too, papa, will you not? You will let me comfort you? you will resolve for my sake that this trouble shall not crush you? Why should it, dearest? you will be the same after it is over that you are now, and the people here were never anything to you. We will leave them all, papa; leave them to say of us what they will, and go far away to find a new world of our own—such a happy one I will try to make it for you, darling, if you will only let me. We will have books and music and flowers, and when we are tired of these, there will be the sea and the hills—a bright blue sea basking in the sunshine, and vineyard-covered hills that look to be sleeping in soft purple mists. And we will be always together, reading or walking or sitting still to look and listen, and our lives will flow on like beautiful music. Oh! papa, my own loved one, say that it shall be so, only say" . . . .

She ceased, for suddenly she found that she had prevailed. Her father had fallen forward on her neck and held her strained to his bosom.

"Child, child, you have conquered—henceforward you are my child in truth—my little Maud, my darling."

"Father, beloved father!"

"Yes, yes, call me that always—you are my

daughter, my dear daughter, in all things as my own."

"But I am your own," she cried, pressing herself closer to him with a movement of jealous fondness.

"My own! oh yes! of course. I meant—I meant . . . . . You must not heed me if I talk strangely, child. I am giddy and confused, and hardly know what I say. But I know that you are my own, all my own now."

And he stroked her head caressingly.

His words had alarmed her a little lest he should be ill, and she released herself from his embrace to gaze anxiously into his face. But he did not seem ill—not nearly so ill indeed as when she had seen him first that evening; for a deep glow had replaced the pallid hue of his cheeks, and his eyes, which had then looked dim and weary, were bright and sparkling now. And besides, they were fixed on her so tenderly, so lovingly.

"Oh! I am happy! so happy!" she cried in a transport of fervour.

"Yes! we are both happy," he said softly. "And to be happier still by-and-by, in that new world you told me of, you know. You will never leave me, little one, will you?"

"Papa!" she remonstrated. "Never, never."

"And you are sure nobody will follow us to take

you from me?" he added with a look of sudden terror.

"Oh! papa, what can make you think of such things? No, no, of course not."

"Why, then indeed we shall be happy. And we shall sit on the sea-beach together, Maud? and you will read to me in your gentle voice when I am tired? I remember your reading to me at the Grange once. I have been very lonely since then."

She looked at him earnestly. It seemed to her that the words came from him more and more faintly.

"Tell me again about the sea and the hills, child —the sea and the hills and the sunshine—will it be always sunshine there?"

"Papa, you are ill!" she cried in anguish, as she marked how the colour was gradually fading from his cheeks and the old look of languor coming back to his eyes.

"Ill, yes—I believe I am ill. Are you with me still, little one? are you with me still?"

His head fell heavily backwards. Maud gave one affrighted glance at his blanched face and closed eyelids, then flew in consternation to the bell and rang it violently.

Mrs. Badgett presented herself in answer to the summons, and was not a little surprised to find her master lying back fainting in his chair, and the young lady whom she had admitted earlier in

the evening bending over him with looks and gestures of wild alarm.

"A doctor—a doctor instantly!" cried Maud. "My —— Mr. Fleming is ill—very ill."

"My gracious goodness me!" exclaimed Mrs. Badgett in violent trepidation. "Poor dear gentleman! What ever shall we do?"

"A doctor!" repeated Maud frantically. "Oh! for Heaven's sake make haste."

"Which I will directly, miss, but who do you think it had better be? There's Dr. Simmons, and Dr. Robinson and Dr. Podkins" . . . . .

"Let it be Dr. Simmons," interrupted Maud, recognising the name of the physician who was considered the most skilful practitioner in Linchester. "But go, go—oh! why do you wait so long?"

Mrs. Badgett was at last prevailed on to depart in quest of aid, leaving the distracted Maud meanwhile to do what she could to revive her father by chafing his hands and sprinkling water on his forehead.

It was long before such simple remedies as she could devise had any effect. The minutes passed on, and Mr. Fleming still remained unconscious, while, in a fever of suspense, Maud watched him, and listened for a sound which should tell her that assistance was at hand. At length a slight sigh escaping his lips made her heart leap with

renewed hope. She looked down eagerly into the pale face; a faint tinge of colour was beginning to flicker on it once more.

"Papa! darling papa!"

He drew a long breath, and slowly opened his eyes with a perplexed air.

"Who is it?" he asked feebly.

"Dearest, don't you know me? It is I, your child, your daughter who has come back to you."

A flush of pleasure flitted over his face, and his lips parted in a smile.

"I remember. Yes, my child, my daughter—mine altogether now."

He put out his hand, with a weak wandering movement, to seek hers. She clasped it tenderly, and for a few moments forgot everything but her happiness in having at last conquered his love. Presently she was roused by the sound of a key unlocking the street door; Mrs. Badgett had evidently returned. Suddenly Maud bethought herself that there was a question which she ought to give her father an opportunity of deciding before she allowed herself to be seen by the doctor by whom Mrs. Badgett was presumably accompanied, and she said in a hurried whisper:

"Papa dear, Dr. Simmons is coming upstairs; he has seen me several times, and if he finds me here he will recognise me at once. And if it is known

that I am alive, everything must be told. Shall I leave you for a little while, so that he shall not see me? There is a chance that yonder man may keep the secret yet, you know."

And as she spoke she sought to disengage her hand. But she found her father's clasp tightening round it convulsively.

"Stay, stay. Let the worst come; I care not, if only you will be my child."

She pressed her lips fondly to his.

"Then I will never leave you, papa."

"No, never, never. Child, are these the hills you told me of?"

"The hills, dearest?"

"And the sea—I hear a sound like the rushing of water."

Alas! he was beginning to wander again; the crisis of his illness was not yet past.

She glanced anxiously round for help; it was already at hand. At that moment the door was thrown open, and Dr. Simmons entered the room. His eyes fell at once on the youthful face which, with such intense solicitude in its expression, was bent over that of his patient, and with an exclamation of astonishment he started a pace backwards.

"Miss Fleming!" he ejaculated.

So now, let Francis Godfrey speak or be silent, the fate of that secret which he and his father before

him had so long been bribed to keep was decided for ever.

"Yes, yes, I am Miss Fleming—she whom you knew as Miss Fleming at least. But look to my father, and save him; for pity's sake save him."

Mr. Fleming was now sitting with his head drooping forward on his chest, breathing heavily and irregularly, and the doctor appeared very grave as he approached.

Nearly an hour passed before Dr. Simmons came away from the house. When at last he departed, he left his patient in bed, beating the air wildly with his hands and talking disjointedly of blue seas and sunlit Southern hills. By this time Mr. Fleming had been pronounced to be suffering from brain fever in one of its most dangerous forms.

CHAPTER XI.

FAMILY AFFAIRS.

ALL through that night did Maud remain in unintermitting, unwearying attendance by her father's bedside. A terrible night it was for her, so little used as she was to see severe illness in any shape, least of all to witness the ravings of delirium in one she loved. And Mr. Fleming's delirium was very painful to behold, sometimes demonstrating itself in frenzied outbursts of grief, anger, or defiance, and altogether unrelieved by lucid intervals. The anxious watcher had not even the consolation of obtaining an occasional word or look of recognition from her beloved patient. Either he did not notice her at all, or, sadder still, addressed her by strange names which only convinced her the more that he knew her not. But she remembered how, while his senses were yet clear, he had taken her to his heart and called her his darling, and the recollection bore her up through

all the horrors of that night. She knew that at last he loved her, and the knowledge gave her new strength to suffer and to do.

The weary night was over at length, and the next day, though it found her father little or no better, did not pass without bringing solace. For in the afternoon she was visited by a true and trusty friend, Nathaniel Digges, who, having come up to Linchester to see Bob and mingle his rejoicings with Jemima's, had heard the report, spread far and wide by Dr. Simmons, of Mr. Fleming's dangerous illness and his daughter's mysterious re-appearance. From the schoolmaster's presence Maud received real good, finding unspeakable comfort in his ready friendship and sympathy; though, indeed, Nathaniel was so violently affected by the meeting that these rather made themselves understood than obtained expression. But they made themselves very plainly understood nevertheless—understood in the awkward motion with which he turned round to conceal the tears springing to his eyes, understood in his eagerly stammered forth offers of assistance.

"Is there anything you would like me to do for you, Miss Fleming? Oh! if you only knew the pleasure I should have in doing anything in the world to make myself of use to you!"

There was, however, only one service which Maud

wished him to render her, and that was one which, in spite of what he had just declared, involved for him not pleasure but exquisite pain, though he consented to perform it, as he would have consented to anything that she demanded of him. It was that he should disclose to Sir Arthur Ormond, and whomsoever else it might concern, the secret of her birth, and the consequent invalidity of her supposed title to the Grange. She had made up her mind that it would not be right to allow the tidings of her re-appearance to disturb the Ormonds for a single day in the secure enjoyment of the Carleton estates; while, even in the interests of her father, it was better that his secret should be first given to the world from the lips of a friend than from those of an enemy like Francis Godfrey. Sorely averse though he was to the task thus imposed on him, Nathaniel could not impugn the justness of her reasoning, and passed a solemn promise to do her bidding faithfully. And when this promise was given, and the schoolmaster had departed on his errand, a great weight was lifted from Maud's mind.

Nathaniel, though the first, was not the only friend who came to renew old relations with Maud that day. After him appeared Jemima, laughing, crying, and talking all at once—sorry for what she

was given to understand of Maud's altered circumstances, but a hundred times more glad to find her friend restored to her under any circumstances whatever, and manifesting her gladness in sundry wild, and perhaps not altogether ungrotesque, modes of demonstration. And yet later in the day came another friend—one whom, as being the oldest of all, Maud was if possible still more pleased to see than either of the others—the faithful and overjoyed Josephine. The news of Maud's return had taken a little longer to reach the ears of Mrs. Walford's lady's maid than those of Nathaniel; but no sooner had she heard it than, with all the impetuosity of her nature, she flew to seek her restored darling, over whom, when found, she wept and sobbed as though her very heart would break in the intensity of her joy. More clamorous still her weeping and sobbing became, though this time there was grief mingled with her rejoicing, when Maud related how it was that she had deserted so true a friend, and explained that she was henceforth not a rich and well-born heiress, but a nameless outcast with nought save shame for her inheritance. But the Frenchwoman's fidelity was nowise shaken by the tidings, and she only clung to Maud with more fervour and devotion than ever when by degrees she had comprehended their purport.

"Ah! my darling, my cherished, do not speak of it, that tears the heart to me. I have failed to die in thinking to all what you have suffered. But at the future you shall suffer no longer alone. I will be with you, mademoiselle—always, always. I will follow you till the end of the world, of the universe if you wish."

"Josephine, dear Josephine!" said Maud, tearfully, taking her humble friend's hand. "Ah! how happy I should be to think that I might indeed hope to have you always near me. But I am afraid papa and I may be very poor, too poor perhaps to be able to" . . . .

"Mademoiselle thinks that I speak of serving her for appointments!" exclaimed Josephine almost with a cry. "Heaven! what thought has then mademoiselle of me? Ah! little one, if I can only follow thee, I shall demand nothing more. And it is what I will do, mademoiselle, it is what I will do; nothing will hinder me of it."

Maud could only press Josephine's hand; she was too much moved for speech.

"But how you are pale, my angel, how you are pale! It is that you have watched all the night, not wishing to confide your papa to the stranger guards that are here? Ah! I know it well. But you are going to repose yourself now—I am come to aid you."

"Dear Josephine! You forget that you have to go back to Mrs. Walford's."

"Ah! but no—Madame Walford has given me the permission to remain if you had want of me. Or, I ought sooner to say, Monsieur Walford—he has seen me who wept because madame had said she could not pass herself of me, and he has promised to make her consent. Ah! what change in this Monsieur Walford since these some hours! Before yesterday it was like an enraged, but since he has learned that all goes well at the bank, and above all since one came to tell him last night that the robber is taken and the money and the jewels all re-found, that has been soft like a lamb. It has appeared to me that he had the air almost sad in speaking of the malady of Monsieur Fleming; one would say that he had shame of himself. Also see you, mademoiselle, that I am free to aid you if you will accord me the permission."

Maud could not reject the assistance thus proffered not only to her but to her father likewise, and returned to his bedside with a soul filled with silent gratitude for the blessing which, in Josephine's faithful friendship, had been granted to her at this her time of utmost need. At least she was not now left to bear her load of heart-sickening anxiety alone—or, worse than alone, in the company of hired attendants who apparently took pleasure in

magnifying their patient's danger. She had a friend now to share her cares and divide her toils—a friend on whom, as she felt, she could implicitly rely.

It was well for her that Josephine's aid had been offered and accepted; otherwise the task of attendance on her father's sick-bed would have been too much for her strength. For days Mr. Fleming lay hovering between life and death, the chances appearing to all eyes but those of Maud to be a great deal more inclined towards death than life; and during all that time he was either unconscious or delirious, never giving word or sign of recognition. But at length she had the infinite joy of seeing him open his eyes, as after a long slumber, and fix them on her face with a smile which, though he was too weak to accompany it by speech, showed that he knew her, showed that he loved her as he had loved her during the last moments of intelligent consciousness that had preceded his illness. And on the doctor's next visit she was told that the worst was over, and that, by a continuance of the same watchful and indefatigable nursing which had been hitherto bestowed on the patient, there was hope that he might surmount the weakness which the fever had left behind, as he had surmounted the fever itself. But there must be care—the most watchful, unremitting care; that was a condition indispensable.

The condition was fulfilled—fulfilled with a tender solicitude which the doctor could scarcely have counted upon—and gradually, very gradually, came the probability, then almost the certainty, that Maud was to have her reward in the preservation of her father's life. And how full in her estimation the reward was—how full and overflowing the measure of her rejoicing on finding that not only was his life saved, but saved apparently to be happier than within her memory it ever had been, saved to be crowned with the supreme blessing of loving and being loved! For, as slowly and day by day he crept towards recovery, it became increasingly evident that he had re-entered upon conscious existence at the point where on the evening of Maud's return he had left it—loving her with the whole strength of a father's affection. He seemed restless and unhappy if she was out of his sight for a moment, and, while still too weak to speak more than a few words, he would lie for hours with her hand folded in his and his eyes fixed tenderly on her face. And when at last he became capable of the effort of speaking and listening, he appeared never tired of discoursing on the happy life that he and Maud were to lead together in a far-away Southern land, with none near them who knew anything of their past save only the devoted Josephine—a life on which it was settled that they

should enter as soon as he was sufficiently recovered to be fit for travelling.

By this time it was understood that no interference with Mr. Fleming's future movements was to be apprehended from Sir Arthur Ormond, who was the only person entitled to consider himself wronged by the fraud by which he had for so many years been kept out of his inheritance, and who had avowed his intention of refraining from pressing his crushed and humbled enemy to a further account. Nor were the Flemings in their new life to be so painfully straitened as Maud had contentedly anticipated that they might be. Thanks to Sir Arthur's forbearance, her father would be left to do what he would with the money arising from the transfer of his share in the firm of Walford and Co. Owing to the present flourishing state of the concern—the old confidence felt by the people of Linchester and the neighbourhood in their favourite bank having redoubled since it had survived the run made upon it after the robbery—he was able to withdraw from the business on specially advantageous terms; so that, even after he should have honourably discharged all obligations to early creditors, there would be a margin for him and Maud to live upon with sufficient comfort. Thus everything promised well for that future to which Mr. Fleming loved to look forward, and which formed the chief subject of

his conversation during the days of his slow convalescence. Happy days those were for both father and daughter, days to be always lovingly remembered through whatever of joy or sorrow might henceforth be in store for either—happy peaceful days, during which they would talk together by the hour, and neither of them touch a jarring chord of the other's heart. He never frowned now at aught she said, nor was she ever pained by the flashes of anger and resentment against others that used to be so frequent in him. Illness had exercised a wonderfully softening and subduing influence on his manner and bearing, if not on his nature; and though perhaps he had not yet learned to forgive those whom he had been wont to hold his foes, he was at least able to keep the worst part of himself under better control than formerly. Truly Maud had reason to deem herself richly rewarded.

There were other ways also in which Mr. Fleming's long illness had not been without its uses to him. He escaped the knowledge of what was said and thought of him in Linchester when his fellow-townsmen discovered the hollowness of the respectability which they had been wont to hold in such veneration—the ordinary tendency of human nature to magnify the faults of the fallen being increased by a feeling of soreness at having been so long taken in. And not only this; he was likewise

spared the pain and excitement of hearing of the trial of Francis Godfrey, which took place a few weeks after his capture, while Mr. Fleming, though on the road to recovery, was still in such a weak state as to be utterly incapable of making any exertion. Of this trial the result was that a verdict of guilty was brought in unhesitatingly against the prisoner, and a sentence of penal servitude for life passed on him amid the approbation of the entire Linchester community. The case for the prosecution was abundantly and superabundantly proved, not only by the fact of the stolen property having been found on the accused, but by the oral evidence of a very important witness—the victim in person, who identified Godfrey undoubtingly as his assailant, and described all the circumstances of the attack with a perspicuity which most satisfactorily demonstrated that it had in no degree impaired his powers of memory. Indeed by this time Bob looked and felt quite himself again. From the moment that he had confounded his medical attendants by suddenly awakening from his long spell of unconsciousness with the remark that he supposed it must be nearly breakfast-time, he had gone on recovering at a rate perhaps not altogether pleasing to the doctors, until they bethought themselves of claiming credit for the wonderful skill and science which, aided by the more than usual density of the patient's

cranium, had averted the fatal result at first predicted. Whatever cause may have principally contributed to his recovery—whether medical care or a happy physical organization — certain it is that when the time came for the trial Bob was as well as if nothing had ever been the matter with him, and was thoroughly able, so far as his constitutional shyness would allow, to enjoy the honours accorded him as the hero of the occasion.

"Yes," said Bob, as, on the evening of the day of the trial, he sat in the kitchen at the school-house relating his experiences to his family circle, "that knocking-down wasn't pleasant at the time, but I think I may say it was about the biggest piece of luck that ever came to me in my life. If you only heard the things that have been said to me to-day!"

And Bob blushed at the mere recollection; his natural bashfulness was too deeply ingrained not to show more or less through any amount of elation.

"Not a bit more than you deserved, my boy, I'll be bound," said Nathaniel. "And so actually the judge paid you a compliment in his charge! What did you say the words were? 'The remarkably clear and straightforward evidence of Mr. Bates'—and—and—let me see, what was it?"

"'Given in a manner which, he must be allowed to say'" . . . . Bob suggested, and then paused sheepishly.

"'Was alike creditable to his head and his heart,'" interposed Jemima, finishing the sentence triumphantly. "Law, only to think of such a thing being said by one of the judges of the land about our Bob! And put into the newspapers afterwards—the're sure to put it into the newspapers, aren't they, uncle?"

"It ain't a bit true, you know," said Bob, whose face was by this time the colour of a full-blown peony. "I never felt so awkward and put out in my life as when I was standing up speaking with everybody looking at me, and my words being taken down as fast as they came out of my mouth. When I heard what the judge said I thought at first he was poking fun at me, but I suppose judges don't do that."

"It is very, very gratifying," said Nathaniel thoughtfully.

"But I haven't told you the best of it yet," said Bob, his face becoming, if possible, a shade redder as he prepared himself to approach the culminating point of his good tidings. "When it was all over, and I had just left court thinking to come straight here to tell you the news—for it was understood to-day was to be a holiday—who should I see but Grimble, bowing and scraping at me as if I had been the grandest person in the world, and asking me would I please go to the bank to say a few

words to Mr. Walford. So off I went of course, and when I got there the first person I saw was Naggles—he who used to be so stuck-up and disagreeable, you know; but it is quite different now, for he is as polite and pleasant-spoken as ever was, and we had quite a sociable chat together, he leaving off by asking me to lend him five shillings as friendly as if I had been his brother. Of course I felt very much pleased, but nothing, bless you, to what I was after I had seen Mr. Walford. For what do you think Mr. Walford wanted to say to me? Why, that because of Mr. Fleming being out of the business, they're going to have another clerk to be under me and Naggles, and considering that I'm to be made more responsible, I'm to be raised at once to" . . . .

"To what?" asked Jemima eagerly, seeing that Bob paused in a flutter of nervous embarrassment.

"Three hundred a year," faltered Bob. "Mr. Walford seems to have taken quite a fancy to me since the robbery, you see," he added apologetically, "and perhaps hearing what the judge said may have had something to do with it."

"Three hundred a year!" ejaculated Jemima, as soon as she could find breath in the extremity of her wonderment. "Three hundred a year! Why, Bob, we're made for life."

"Yes, I think that's just about what we are,"

said Bob modestly. "And fifty pounds he gave me down besides, as a testimonial, he was kind enough to say, for the—the zeal and courage, or something like that I believe it was, with which I defended the property of the bank at—at the risk of my life in short. But that is all nonsense, you know, for I hadn't got time to think of anything scarcely, and so I told him, still all I could say didn't make a bit of difference."

"My own dear boy!" cried Nathaniel, getting up to shake hands with his nephew from pure inability to put his congratulations into words. "You deserve it all, Bob, you deserve it all."

"So you see I am quite rich now," went on Bob, speaking very low, and casting down his eyes in a state of intense nervousness. "And as I came away from Mr. Walford, I got looking into the big watchmaker's window at the corner of High Street, and there were some very handsome articles inside, and I thought—I thought" . . . .

Bob paused in a very agony of bashfulness, then, desperately plunging his hand into his pocket, brought out a small parcel which he laid before Nathaniel.

"Perhaps you won't mind accepting it, uncle—they warranted it for a good goer."

The contents of the parcel proved to be a substantial gold watch which Bob had perpetrated the

extravagance of buying for his uncle — the first fruits of his new accession of good fortune. And Nathaniel was so much touched by the mark of his nephew's affection that his acknowledgments were much more eloquently expressed by his glistening eyes and quivering lips than by his unready tongue.

"How am I ever to thank you?" he said at last, when the present had been duly inspected and admired by the family in conclave. "The very thing I have been wanting for years, though I never thought to get it. My dear, dear Bob!"

"I only wish there had been ten of them instead of one," said Bob, twisting himself about with a clumsiness of gesture only matched by the clumsiness of his ideas. "For I am sure there's nothing I could give you that would half-quarter express my feelings to you, uncle, or my obligation for all you have done for us. But though I am so rich, I have got a good deal to do with my money, you see—just for the present at least. I have been thinking —if you approve it, uncle—that I should like to give the girls a piano."

"My dear boy! The very thing! Yes, yes, they shall be brought up like young ladies after all," cried Nathaniel, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"And something for me, Bob, something for me," pleaded Tommy. "Don't you go and forget me, Bob."

"No, no, I won't forget you, or Moses either—he shall have a beautiful new collar the very next time I come. And Jemima, you must have somebody to do the house-work for you now—I have been thinking of it all the way, and have quite made up my mind."

"You must, my dear girl," said Nathaniel, seeing that Jemima shook her head. "The work is far too much for your strength. And as long as you work so hard you will have no time for practising, you know."

The last argument seemed to tell with Jemima. She resigned herself, though with evident unwillingness, to the life of *otium cum dignitate* which seemed to be preparing for her.

"I suppose, then, we must have somebody," she replied rather dolefully, "though I know she'll break half the things in the house and let the floors get black through want of scrubbing—those girls are all alike. But there are two things I'll never let her do," cried Jemima with a sudden outburst of energy, "not if you were to ask me ever so. As long as I live I'll stand out for making uncle's pudding and washing Tommy's face with my own hands."

"And you'll let me always help to pick the fruit for preserves, won't you, Jem?" put in Tommy beseechingly. "Oh do say yes, and I'll promise it shan't make me ill any more."

"Yes, yes," said Jemima absently. "And then there will be uncle's stockings to darn, and the linen to mend, and Moses to give his meals to, and Amelia and Anne to be kept to their practising, and the girl to look after—lot's of looking after she'll need, I'll be bound. Oh yes! there will be plenty to do, after all—plenty to do."

Jemima apparently found a great deal of consolation in the reflection, for she immediately brightened up very considerably, and in a few moments more stole round to Nathaniel, and, putting her arm about his neck, said:

"I am so happy, uncle dear—so happy and delighted. If it wasn't for the thought of poor dear Miss Fleming having to go so far away from us, I don't think I should have anything else left to wish for."

And indeed not only Jemima but all the members of the little circle assembled in the school-house kitchen this evening were in a state of profound happiness and enjoyment, so that it might have been difficult to find a more contented family group anywhere. On Bob's round good-humoured face—its pristine plumpness of proportion and ruddiness of colour now quite restored—there mantled such a glow of honest pride and pleasure at the idea of what he had done and what he was going to do for the benefit of those he loved, that it vied in radi-

ance with that best dish-cover of real Britannia metal which shone over the mantel-piece, in Jemima's estimation forming the chief ornament of the kitchen. Then Amelia and Anne—sitting together in a corner and exchanging whispered speculations on what would be thought by their bosom friends, Sarah Jane Price and Matilda Perkins, of the increase of dignity implied in a piano and maid-of-all-work—were in a condition of satisfaction as nearly approaching Bob's as the pleasure of receiving ever can approach that of giving; so that they actually looked on without a murmur while Tommy directed the movements of an attacking force against the citadel of Badajos, represented by one of their work-boxes. As for Tommy himself, he was supremely happy in anticipations (fortunately exaggerated) of unlimited plum-cake and toffee—his only care being a harassing doubt whether to ask Bob for a park of artillery by way of completing his army, or for a little gold watch something like uncle Nat's, only not to go. Such was the general rejoicing that even Moses was infected by it, and, with a vague sense that something very decisive had turned up for the good of the family of which he was a member, cocked his ears and wagged his tail with an expressiveness which caused him to be instantly seized upon by Jemima and carried round the room to be patted, praised, hugged, and otherwise made of by everybody in suc-

cession; so that if he had not been, as he was, the best of dogs, his moral character would never have recovered from so much spoiling.

If there was any exception to the completeness of the felicity which reigned in the schoolmaster's kitchen that evening, it was to be sought, not in Bob, or his sisters, or Tommy, or the sympathetic Moses, but in the schoolmaster himself. In Nathaniel's happiness, real and substantial though it was, there existed a defect—such a defect perhaps as a vein of gold in a mass of baser metal, a blemish which gives new value to the thing it mars, but still a defect which made his joy less perfect of its kind than that of the others. For lately—understanding by "lately" the time which had passed since he had first known Maud Fleming—his eyes had opened slowly and by degrees (ah! with what treacherous fineness of gradation) to potentialities of bliss which he knew could for him never be realised, which it would have seemed to him indeed profanity for such an awkward, insignificant, limping creature as himself even to dream of realising. He was resigned to his fate; and yet, with all his resignation, he could never think of a certain sweet face that he knew of—and when was the bright image absent from his thoughts?—without feeling in his heart a strange aching pain as of a void, and in his whole being an unsatisfactory sense of incompleteness.

Something was missing to him—something which he had never for an instant looked to possess, and yet which he missed sorely nevertheless. Thus it was that Nathaniel, in the midst of his rejoicing household, was not happy with a perfect happiness.

And still perhaps he was not altogether to be pitied for this hidden grief which tinged his smile with melancholy as he tried to return the bright looks which met him on every side. He was the better for it surely—the better for it as every good man must be the better for the chastening influence of sorrow patiently borne. And probably he was the happier for it also; at all events he would not have had it, and the memories associated with it, effaced from his heart for all the wealth of Golconda. For the poetical element of life is a precious thing for those who are able to appreciate it, especially if their every-day surroundings happen to be commonplace and prosaic; and his unavowed, unsuspected love, in spite of all the pangs that it caused him, constituted the romance of Nathaniel's existence.

CHAPTER XII.

A SURPRISE.

IT was some two or three weeks after the trial, and on the sunny afternoon of a fine September day Maud Fleming was sitting at her post by her father's bedside, smiling at him tenderly and cheerfully. Nor was the brightness of her smile in any degree assumed, since she had reason to feel happier to-day than usual. Dr. Simmons had just paid his accustomed visit, and, besides pronouncing his patient well enough to be allowed to rise for an hour or two on the morrow, had set at rest Maud's anxious inquiries as to the prospects of her father's health in the future with a reply almost more satisfactory than she had dared to anticipate. Let Mr. Fleming but be guarded against all disturbing causes, and it was probable—so the doctor thought—that a change of climate might so far reinstate his broken constitution as to enable him to reach the natural term of human existence in the enjoy-

ment of a fair degree of health and strength. The danger principally to be feared for him was violent mental excitement; but, as Maud thankfully remembered, did not all possible sources of such excitement seem to be already exhausted for him? And thus was her spirit to-day more than ordinarily glad and grateful.

Meanwhile Mr. Fleming lay looking at her thoughtfully.

"Child," he said at last, "was it a dream or did I really hear that before you came to me you had been living with—with—at Ilscote, I mean? Was that so, Maud? tell me."

"Yes," said Maud, falteringly. "But it was hardly by my own seeking, papa, and you promised" . . . .

"No, no, it was not you that I had any thought of blaming. I have been thinking, Maud, that perhaps—I wonder if it is possible that" . . .

"That what, dearest?" she asked encouragingly, seeing that he paused as though he had difficulty in putting his meaning into words.

"That—that I can have been mistaken in what I thought of that woman," he brought out at length with an effort.

"My own darling papa!" cried Maud, stooping down to kiss him in ecstasy. "Oh yes! indeed you have been mistaken—very, very much. She is a

good noble-hearted woman, papa—quite incapable of doing wrong to anybody, I am sure."

"God forgive me if it is so," he said, and a look of intense pain passed convulsively over his features. "And yet was not the mistake natural? was it not natural that when they tried to keep my wife from me, and afterwards when I saw her slowly dying before my eyes" . . . .

He set his teeth, and the old expression of vindictive hatred re-appeared for a moment. But only for a moment; with a look almost of fear he checked himself, muttering:

"I must take care, I must take care." He paused for a few seconds to recover himself, and then continued: "And you were happy with her, I suppose? very happy, were you not?"

"As happy as it was possible for me to be then, papa. She was very kind to me."

"Yes, yes, I understand. Now tell me, Maud, are you sure you would not feel happier living with her than with me?"

"Papa, papa!" she cried, the tears springing to her eyes, "how can you speak to me so cruelly?"

"You are sure you would not? Quite sure?"

"As if I were not a thousand times happier to be with you than with anybody else in the whole world, papa!" exclaimed Maud almost indignantly. "A thousand times—yes indeed! a thousand times."

Again she bent down and fondly pressed her lips against his.

He put out his arms and held her to his bosom.

"Then I am not selfish if I keep you to myself?" he whispered. "You love me better than anybody in the world, Maud, I think?"

"Of course I do, of course I do," she asseverated. "Oh! what can you take me for that you ask?"

"And better than all the riches of the world too?" he persisted. "Better than houses, and land, and jewels, and fine clothing?"

"Papa, how can you ask? Do you not love me better than all those things?"

"My little one, God knows I would not give thee up to be made an emperor." He strained her closer to him still, and added: "No, no, I will not give you up—never, never. You are my child, my own—now and always. And how happy we shall be, my darling, shall we not?"

"Shall we not, papa? And we shall soon be able to go to our new home now, you know. The doctor says that in a very short time you will be strong enough to travel. Let me see, we shall be quite settled before the winter, I hope."

He delightedly entered into her calculation, and for the next few minutes they were both engrossed in bright anticipations of the future. They might

have talked much longer but that Maud, fearful of allowing her patient to exert himself too much, enjoined him to rest. He obeyed—evidently somewhat fatigued by the excitement of the conversation—and presently fell into a deep calm sleep, the sleep of a man whose mind is thoroughly tranquillised and set at rest.

Maud was wonderfully happy as she sat and watched him—wonderfully happy, considering that in the midst of all her causes for rejoicing she yet carried about with her an unhealed though hidden wound, and one whose smart she sometimes felt acutely. She was ashamed that it should be there at all, but all her shame did not help to cure it, did not prevent her from feeling its pain every time that the question recurred to her—Did Philip Ormond see anything to condemn in her conduct, that since her return to her father he had not thought fit to let her have from him one word of kindness or goodwill, one word to show her that she had his approbation? In asking herself this, she did not forget that the man whose good opinion she craved was he whom, ever since the night of Mrs. Arbuthnot's ball, she had schooled herself to regard as the betrothed husband of Edith Merton. Could she have forgotten it, she would have felt less ashamed of the pangs which it caused her to find the question still unanswered. But, resigned as she had taught herself to

be to the prospect of finding him indifferent to her, she could not be resigned to the idea of being blamed by him. If he had approved what she had done, surely the remembrance of the dead-and-gone past might have induced him to send her a word, if not of friendship, at least of sympathy. It would have cost him so little, would have been so unspeakably precious to her!

The absence of any sign on the part of Philip Ormond was so much the more cutting since, of all those whose opinion she cared for, he was the only one that had stood aloof from her. Nathaniel, Jemima, Josephine, all had given her the sanction of their approval and undiminished friendship; and not only these, but one whose esteem it would have been yet harder to her to forego—Lady Rosamond Carleton. As soon as she could find time to spare from her attendance on her father's sick-bed she had written a long letter to that beloved friend, confessing everything, avowing the identity of the poor governess who had been so kindly received at Ilscote with the Maud Fleming the story of whose illegitimate birth and fraudulently established heiresship was now the nine days' wonder of Linchester and Hernebridge, explaining the reason of her sudden departure from the Lodge, and concluding with a prayer that Lady Rosamond would judge her gently. And she had received a reply

which, when she read it, made her weep tears of gratitude and joy—a reply expressing, not approval only, but admiration of her conduct, and assuring her of a warm and unabated regard which had not been so much as momentarily shaken by the circumstances of her abrupt leave-taking. Even Lady Blanche had been prevailed upon to send a gracious message, so that nothing was wanting to the completeness of the restored harmony of Maud's relations with her friends at Ilscote. After this three or four letters had been exchanged, Lady Rosamond's invariably testifying the most cordial friendship and sympathy, and even hinting at assistance to be gladly given if assistance was required. In the last of these she had spoken of her strong desire to see Maud again, adding that she expected shortly to be in the neighbourhood of Linchester, as she had just accepted an invitation to spend a few weeks at Ormond Hall.

No wonder, then, that with so much kindness shown to her by others, the silence of Philip Ormond —of him whose image filled so large a space in the world of her thoughts—should have been felt by Maud with peculiar acuteness, and even magnified into a tacit censure. True, a man on the eve of marriage must have many conflicting claims on his time and attention; but then so little would have been enough! A message of half-a-dozen kind

words would have sufficed for her consolation, and surely he might have found leisure to frame and means to send such a message as that, whatever he might be doing, or wherever he might be.

For in such ignorance was she left of all that concerned the man in whom she could not help feeling so absorbing an interest, that all this while she did not even know where he was. She instinctively shrank from making any inquiries regarding him, and Nathaniel, though usually very ready to retail all such Hernebridge gossip as he thought she might care to hear, had volunteered no information on the subject of his former pupil. She understood, indeed, that he was not yet married, and she had further been able to gather that almost ever since the termination of his visit at Lady Rosamond's he had been absent from Ormondsbury—doubtless, as she told herself, in attendance on his betrothed; but beyond this she knew absolutely nothing, save only that to her he had vouchsafed no token of sympathy. And, strive as she would to reason herself into a more philosophical spirit, his neglect was very bitter to her.

She was sitting by her father's bedside, her thoughts involuntarily busy with Philip Ormond and his unkindness—her thoughts were now very frequently busied thus—when a tap at the chamber

door roused her from her meditations and made her hurry to open it.

"If you please, miss," said Mrs. Badgett, sinking her voice to a sepulchral whisper in obedience to Maud's warningly raised finger, "if you please, you're wanted downstairs. I've showed him into the parlour, miss; I hope that was right."

"Who is it? Mr. Digges, I suppose?"

Mrs. Badgett shook her head, and, drawing her hand from under her apron, produced a card. Maud looked, and read the words: "Mr. Philip Ormond."

A giddiness came over her. She stood mute and motionless, gazing fixedly downwards on the words she had just read, though after the first moment she was unable to distinguish them through the mist that floated before her eyes.

"Shall I say you are coming down, miss?" asked Mrs. Badgett, unobservant of her emotion.

She compelled herself to answer "Yes;" then with staggering steps turned away from the housekeeper and re-entered the room. Her father was still sleeping, or he could not have failed to notice that something unusual had occurred, so pale and bloodless was her face, so quick and panting her respiration, as she sank down half-fainting on a chair by the bedside. For some minutes she sat, utterly helpless in her agitation; but at last pride

came to her aid, and, remembering that it behoved her to show no trace of weakness in the presence of Edith Merton's betrothed, she made a strong effort of will, and rose resolutely to her feet. Yes, she would meet him with a clear steady front, and respond to his expressions of sympathy, if such he came to offer, with a calm serenity of manner that should betray no feeling save gratitude—fortified for the ordeal by the recollection of the glowing radiance of Edith Merton's beauty as she had seen it first in the conservatory. Thus determining, she drew herself up almost proudly, and, pressing her hand on her heart as though to restrain its tumultuous throbbing, cast a tender glance towards her sleeping father, and passed out of the room.

The strength of the spirit conquered the weakness of the flesh, and Maud was, or seemed at least, preternaturally tranquil and composed as she descended to the room where Philip awaited her. A slight pause she made outside the threshold, temporarily deprived of power to advance by a sudden swelling at her heart; but again her resolution triumphed. In a moment more she opened the door with a firm hand, and—pale indeed, yet with a quiet, almost statue-like, calmness of expression—made a steady step forward. Was she not going to meet the affianced husband of Edith Merton?

But her artificial composure was broken down at the first moment of the interview for which she had with so much pains assumed it. Scarcely had she entered the room when she heard a well-remembered voice calling her "Maud," and, through the dimness that hung like a film before her eyes, saw a well-remembered figure springing forward to meet her with an eagerness so different from the frigid salutation which she had expected that she could not play her part any longer. She trembled violently, and, falling into a chair, burst into a passion of tears, conscious of nothing in the external world save that Philip Ormond was kneeling at her feet, holding one of her hands firmly clasped in his.

"Maud—my Maud—my own beloved Maud."

Such were the words that first reached her through the whirl and confusion of her senses, and for a moment they sounded wondrously sweet—sweeter than the sweetest melody she had ever listened to. But presently there rose before her the vision of Edith Merton's triumphant face, and an icy chill crept over her; the echo of the syllables that when they were uttered had sounded in her ears so pleasantly rang in them now with a tone of cruel irony. For was it not evident that either Philip had forgotten himself when he spoke them, or that he had deliberately permitted himself to

insult her? She made an attempt to disengage her hand. But it was too tightly grasped to be withdrawn.

"Oh! my Maud, my darling, my lost treasure found again!",

Her heart palpitated with something like indignation at finding that he persisted in mocking her with language that might have been so inexpressibly welcome, that was so cruelly bitter. She must be fallen indeed in his estimation that he dared to trifle with her thus.

"No more, Mr. Ormond, no more. If you do not respect me, respect at least the—the lady you are to marry. Leave me, I entreat you."

Again she tried to withdraw her hand, but again she found it detained.

"The lady I am to marry! What! have they been practising on you too? Maud, for Heaven's sake tell me what you mean."

A wild hope shot through her, but she remembered Edith's self-complacent smile, and Cecilia Arbuthnot's news, and the hope died away even in its birth. Philip was only trifling with her after all.

"Mr. Ormond, this is not generous. You know very well that I mean Miss Merton."

He sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Who has dared to tell you this lie? And so stupid a lie too—as stupid as wicked. Miss Merton was married last month—to a Captain Vivian, I believe."

Maud could not speak. There was a wild rush of blood through her veins which for the moment rendered her incapable of answering by word or sign, unless indeed an answer might be read in the sudden flush of gladness which rose glowing to her cheeks. For gladness was in her heart. Why, it might be hard to define, but it was there nevertheless—gladness almost as deep and genuine as though she could have had a hope of becoming what it appeared that Edith Merton was not to be. She understood well that such hopes were not for her; she felt, as keenly as Sir Arthur himself could have done, that Gilbert Fleming's base-born daughter must never be Philip Ormond's wife; and yet she could not help being penetrated with joy at the tidings that Philip Ormond was free. But she knew, even in rejoicing, that she had no right, no reason, to rejoice.

"Who has told you this lie?" asked Philip again. "Oh! Maud, surely I have a claim to know."

"No one. I thought—I understood—from things I heard at—at a place many miles from this . . . Oh! please do not ask me further," she implored,

reddening with a feeling of humiliation at having confessed to so jealously watchful an interest in him as her words implied.

He paused for an instant in apparent hesitation, and at length said resolutely:

"I will not ask you then. I will rather tell you the whole truth concerning myself, so that, whatever you may have heard of me, you may know what to believe. Maud, my own Maud, can you forgive me if I confess to you that there was a time since I lost you when I was in danger of pledging myself to another?"

She looked at him without surprise. She needed not this confirmation of the truth of that which her own eyes had witnessed.

"But Maud, I may lay my hand on my heart and honestly declare my solemn belief that that time would never have come for me, neither now nor years hence, if I had not heard that man, that Francis Godfrey—I understand now how he slandered you—claim the right to mourn your memory as that of his promised wife."

"And you believed him!" cried Maud, in a voice of anguish. "Merciful Heaven! If I had known . . . . And you believed him!"

"Forgive me, Maud. But he said it in your father's presence, and how could I think that he lied? I did not know then what I know now, that

he was a treacherous villain, and that your father was in his power. No need to tell me now that it was not true, my Maud."

It was a little comfort to her to hear this, but she could not help shuddering still to think that she should ever have been so wronged in Philip's opinion.

"I would not have repeated so vile a slander to you, only that it is my own best excuse for weakness and folly which I should otherwise never forgive to myself. For I am going to tell everything, Maud—to confess the whole of my infatuation. It went very far—I tremble to think how far it went. My love, there was a moment when I believe I was on the point of asking Edith Merton to be my wife."

Ay, she had known it; had she not with her own eyes beheld the tender scene in the conservatory?

"I seemed that evening to be under a kind of fascination. It was at a ball—she was very beautiful—more beautiful than I had ever seen her; she knew that I admired her, I think, and led me on. I had never forgotten you, Maud, as I forgot you then."

He paused to cast towards her a fond glance of deprecation, then continued:

"We were alone together; music was sounding from the next room, there were flowers and green

leaves around us—nothing was wanting to the spell. And I think another moment, Maud, would have seen me at her feet, only that just as I was about to speak and make myself her slave, a vision rose up before me which caused me to turn from her in forgetfulness that such a woman was."

"A vision!"

"The vision of your face."

"You saw me then! I was afraid for a moment that you had, but I thought" . . . . .

"What! was it you I saw—you in very truth? Oh! Maud, are you not mocking me? You in the garden that night! How can it be?"

"I—I heard you were in the conservatory, and I wished—I wished" . . . . .

Her face and neck became scarlet, and she bowed her head in a very agony of shame. Was it not tantamount to an avowal of love, this confession that she had come out in the rain and the darkness only for the pleasure of beholding him? And oh! the anguish of feeling that she had thus betrayed her secret to him from whom of all others she would most jealously have guarded it—him whose wife she never could, never would be!

"My Maud! my heart's own love! That you should have been so near me and I knew it not! How was it? how did it come to pass?"

"I was living in the house where you were

a guest that evening. I was Mrs. Arbuthnot's governess."

"You living in that house! Oh! if I could have known, if I could have guessed! I went out to seek you, but rather in the hope that the vision would appear to me again than that I should find you in flesh and blood. Could I have deemed it possible that I should, I would have moved heaven and earth before giving up the search. But oh! Maud, how fast you must have fled from me!"

"I was afraid you had seen me," she murmured. "And I would have given anything at that time rather than be discovered."

But was not the discovery he had made now almost as terrible as the discovery he might have made then?

"You would not have succeeded in escaping me but that I had to disturb Miss Merton before I could make my way out. She must have believed me mad, I think. She could not understand at first that I wanted to leave her so abruptly, and, when she did, was so offended that she would hardly trouble herself to let me pass her. And when, after a minute lost thus, I found myself in the open air, there was no trace of you—not though I wandered through all the garden looking for you—nothing to tell me that the fleeting glimpse I had caught was not a mere trick of imagination, or, as I loved

rather to think, a vision sent to keep me true to you. And I swore that it should always keep me true, my love. That single glance of your sweet face had triumphed over the memory of Francis Godfrey's slander, and I hated myself for ever having doubted you. The impression did not fade, Maud—rather grew stronger and stronger; so that night and day, sleeping and waking, you were never from my thoughts. I returned home a day or two after that evening—I could not stay longer among strangers—but I was still restless and uneasy, too full of grief for having lost you, of self-reproach for having doubted you, to take pleasure in anything that formerly interested me. And thus it was that, little thinking of the consolation that was so soon to come to seek me here, I set out to look for it in travel. But your image, Maud, haunted me in Canada even as it had haunted me at home, and grief and self-reproach haunted me too."

Canada! so he had been all this time in Canada! his apparent neglect was explained now.

"Oh! my beloved, can I ever tell the joy that I felt when, little more than a fortnight ago, I read letters from home which had been for weeks following me from one post-town to another with the tidings of your return? It was joy so deep and tender, Maud, that I almost forgot to mourn for

what you must have suffered in learning what those letters likewise told me of. Within that same hour I turned my face homeward, and have been travelling towards you ever since, chafing at the distance that separated us, yet happy in knowing that every minute diminished it, that every minute brought me nearer to the time when I should be able to kneel at your feet as I do now, and ask you as I do now to be my wife."

What! did Philip Ormond ask her to be his wife—her, the child of shame, the fraudulent usurper of his inheritance? Surely she must be dreaming.

"Maud, speak to me. Oh! my darling, why are you silent?"

He tried to seize her hand, but she evaded his eager grasp, and forced her pale lips to frame an answer.

"Because you speak of what can never, must never, be. Oh! go—for pity's sake go—this is torture to me."

"Maud, how is this? what do you mean? Speak—it cannot be worse torture to you than it is to me."

She looked at him almost with reproach.

"Do you not understand? Must I then be forced to remind you of what I am? And yet you said just now that they had told you."

A rush of blood dyed her brow crimson, and

disclosed her meaning more plainly than any words could have done.

"They told me everything of you that the world knows, but I know of you yet more than that. For I know that you are the treasure of my heart, the light and joy of my life, and that, without you to share it with me, existence would not be worth having."

"I must not hear you," she exclaimed wildly, starting to her feet and making an impotent effort to pass him. "Oh! let me go, pray let me go. You are so good and so noble that you forget how cruel others are, you forget what would be said if . . . . Oh! if you have any pity, let me go."

"I am my own master, and I will not be cheated of my life's happiness in deference to others. I care not what they say."

"But I care—I cannot help caring. And they shall never say I have dragged you down—never, never. I have wronged your family enough already; tell Sir Arthur Ormond I will never give him further cause to blame me."

"My father shall not blame you, Maud. He loves me, he can appreciate nobility such as yours, and when I tell him how my whole happiness depends on having you for my wife, how generously you have denied me, he shall come himself and pray you to consent."

Alas! was not Philip overrating his father's indulgence and his own powers of persuasion? But he was desperate, and a desperate man catches at straws.

Still Maud persistently shook her head.

"I will not drag you down," she repeated. "And even that is not all, though it is enough, a thousand times more than enough, to keep me firm. I have a father too—a father whom I have promised never to leave, and I never will."

"Maud, Maud, you shall not put me off thus. If you care for me, you owe a duty to me as well as to him, and you must find a way of reconciling both. It will be easy, for I love you too well not to love you the more for not forgetting that you are a daughter."

Ah! how well he loved her surely, if for her sake he was ready to honour Gilbert Fleming as the father of his wife. She was grateful—Heaven knew how grateful; but still she was firm in her resolve—firmer than ever. Would she requite his nobleness by trailing his honourable name through the dust?

"Oh Maud! do you not love me then? For if you do you have no right to sacrifice my happiness to wire-drawn scruples. Do you not love me?"

"I will never consent to what you ask," she

answered tremulously, yet resolutely. "It will not, cannot be."

But she could not answer his question in the negative, and he saw that she could not.

"It shall be," he exclaimed impetuously. "Maud, say what you will, do what you will, I can never cease from hoping and striving till I have obtained your promise to be mine."

His vehemence was nearly too much for her self-control. But she understood that any show of emotion would only prolong her torture, and succeeded in replying, with a quiet composure that almost surprised herself:

"Mr. Ormond, you have had my answer. It is time now that we should part, and part for ever. Hereafter you will not think the worse of me because I have not wished to sacrifice the last poor shred of self-respect that is still left to me by allowing you to lower yourself to my level."

He tried to speak, but she would not listen, and went on, still in the same calm voice:

"You have made me very happy by your generous recognition of me in my sorrows, by your forgiveness of the wrong I have unknowingly done you and your father—very happy indeed. If ever you think of me in the future, perhaps it may be a satisfaction to you to know that."

"Maud, Maud!"

"But I hope you will think of me very little. I hope that you will soon be able to forget me quite, that you will soon find one for your wife whom you can love, and who will be more worthy of you than I am, and that you will be happy with her till the end of your days. I will pray for you as long as I live."

She had gradually drawn near the door as she spoke, and now, making a motion to him that he must not follow, glided rapidly from the room, as apparently calm as when she had entered it. But the calmness was not more real now than it had been then, for no sooner had she locked herself in her own little chamber than she threw herself on her bed and sobbed aloud in uncontrollable anguish.

In blank dismay Philip meanwhile stood, his eyes fixed on the spot where he had but now seen that pale face gazing at him with mild beseeching deprecation. He understood enough of Maud's character to know that his chance of winning her was very slight; indeed, in spite of himself, he could not help instinctively feeling a half-avowed fear that none such existed for him. But the happiness of his whole future depended on the issue, and he would not surrender the happiness of his future without a struggle. Maud had refused him, but she loved him, and he would

not be content with her refusal. He would never rest until he had prevailed upon her to retract it, would leave no means untried by which he might hope to gain his end. And, this resolution made, he left the house and set off on his way homeward, wondering what the effect would be on Maud if Sir Arthur Ormond could be induced to come forward and ask her hand for his son.

That evening the walls of the stately dining-room at Ormond Hall witnessed one of the stormiest scenes that had ever taken place between a chief of the house of Ormond and his heir—a scene which, but for an exercise of the extremest forbearance and self-control on the part of the young man, must have infallibly led to a deadly and irreconcilable breach. For Philip had said that he must have Maud Fleming for his wife, and had asked his father to aid him in his suit; and Sir Arthur, as any one but a lover in his desperation might have anticipated, had responded by falling into a fierce passion, during which he had given vent to such denunciations of Gilbert Fleming and his daughter as Philip's blood boiled to hear. But still he did not suffer his answers, warm as they were, to carry him beyond the limits of a son's respect, and left his father's presence without having spoken a word of anger or defiance, though with

a resolve still firmly fixed to persevere till he had compassed Maud's consent to be his. Yet how to compass it? that question still remained unsolved, and seemed more hopeless of solution than ever. His father had positively refused to countenance his suit; and not only this, but had uttered a threat by which for the present he felt debarred from urging it on his own behalf. The old man had said something in his anger of calling Gilbert Fleming to account for his fraud; and though this was probably an empty menace, it had been put forward seriously enough to decide Philip that he must abstain from even seeing Maud until she and her father should be out of the country and beyond the reach of Sir Arthur's vengeance. It cost him much to decide thus, but he loved her too well to allow his impatience to endanger her peace of mind; and in the mean time he found comfort in the prospect of following her as soon as he should hear that she had left England.

While he thus waited, nothing was said between father and son on the topic which chiefly occupied the thoughts of both, and little indeed on any other. It was but natural that it should be so, since the single subject of common interest was one which each intuitively felt could only be introduced at the risk of a deadly feud. When the first glow of anger was over, Sir Arthur, scarcely less than

Philip, shrank from the idea of an avowed breach; and he knew that such a breach would be the only too probable result of another discussion such as the last. The infatuation, he thought, would be sure to die out of itself if it was not meddled with; and so long as his authority were not openly set at defiance, he would not quarrel with his only son for the sake of a whole generation of Flemings.

It was not, however, in the nature of Sir Arthur's garrulous old age to be quite silent on a matter so profoundly exciting to him, and he amply made up for the self-control with which he avoided it in Philip's presence by the unrestrained freedom he allowed himself in discussing it with others. In a very few days it was universally known in the neighbourhood of Hernebridge and Ormondsbury that Sir Arthur considered himself, by Jove, one of the most unfortunate men in the world, for his son had taken leave of his senses and was positively wanting to marry that girl of Fleming's, a tramping gipsy's daughter, you know. Yes, actually wanting to marry her, that base-born cheat, who, he shouldn't wonder a bit, had been in the trick all along, and now thought to get the property back by entrapping that silly fellow of his into a marriage. And, confound it, had very nearly succeeded, for, would you believe it, the boy had come to him the other day to ask his intercession with the fair lady—

absolutely to ask his intercession. But he had answered plump that he would as soon think of going to the Foundling or the parish workhouse to look for a daughter-in-law as of fetching one home from Gilbert Fleming's house, and, in short, had given the boy so round a piece of his mind, that upon his word and honour he flattered himself he shouldn't hear of the subject again.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST EVENING.

ABOUT a week had passed since Philip Ormond had paid his visit to the dull house at Linchester, and again Maud was sitting with her father in the afternoon sunshine, trying as best she could to cheer the long hours of convalescence. He had been making comparatively rapid progress in the interval, for, though he had not yet left his room, he was allowed to get up for some hours daily, and had even reached the point of being able to walk a few paces without assistance. His toilet had been just completed, and, arrayed in dressing-gown and slippers, he was now comfortably seated in an easy-chair near the window, looking at Maud as she sat opposite to him with her eyes bent downwards on her work. She was making him a new dressing-gown for winter, which she had begun some days before with not a little pride and pleasure in the economy implied in home manufacture. There had been a good deal of laughing and

talking on the subject of this same dressing-gown, Mr. Fleming prophesying that she would never contrive to get through so cumbrous a piece of work, and she attacking her task with a tremendous display of zeal and vigour, and a promise to produce the most comfortable garment he had ever worn. But to-day, and indeed for some days past, though she worked as industriously as ever, there was hardly the same energy visible in her diligence which there had been a week ago. There was something listless and wearied in the very motion of her hand as she plied her needle—something in her whole bearing of languor and lassitude which corresponded but too fitly with the pallor of her cheeks, and which she vainly endeavoured to conceal by an assumption of gaiety. And indeed how could she hope to conceal it, when, ever since Philip Ormond's visit, there had been a great oppression at her heart, making itself felt in the midst of all her occupations by day, and depriving her of rest by night? She strove to conceal it nevertheless; she knew how much pain it would give her father to suspect that she was ailing in health or spirits. But he loved her too well to be long deceived.

"Maud," he said, after he had sat for some time uneasily watching her, "what makes you so pale, my child? I am sure you cannot be well."

"I am not quite well to-day, dear papa. I have a bad headache."

She pressed her hand to her fevered forehead, then added smilingly:

"Pray don't mind me, papa. It will go off soon, I dare say."

"I have been fancying for the last few days that you have not been looking yourself, though you would never allow me to say so. What is the matter with you, my pet? tell me, what is the matter with you?"

"You know I have not been accustomed to keep within doors so much as I have done lately," she answered evasively. "I dare say that is not good for me. Only wait till we get to Naples, papa, and you shall see the difference. Moral—you have to make great haste to get well enough to take me there. What do you say to that, papa?"

But he was too deep in thought to have any smile to spare for her little sally. He was mute for a few moments, and then asked her:

"Do you remember the conversation we had last week, Maud? You are sure you are quite happy to be with me, happier than you would be with—anywhere else?"

"Papa, papa, how can you go on saying these cruel things? Yes, of course—happier by far."

She rose and kissed him, and he put his arms round her, whispering:

"Forgive me for asking. I am content again now."

He released her, and she once more took up her work, straining by lively talk and cheerful looks to make him think that she was not ailing. But the effort was too much for her, and soon she found her head throbbing so violently that, do what she would, she could not dissemble any longer.

"Papa dear," she said, laying aside her work, "I think I had better go and lie down for a few hours; my headache is very bad. I will send Josephine to read to you. Don't look so concerned, darling papa, please; I am sure I shall be better in the evening."

With tottering steps she left the room, her father's eyes following her with a look of anxiety that even after her departure did not disappear from them. Presently Josephine entered, and began searching for a book from which Maud had been directing her to read.

"Never mind that, Josephine. I want to speak to you about your mistress—she is not well."

"But yes—that is only too sure; mademoiselle is not well to-day."

"I am afraid she has not been well for some time past; she has been neglecting herself, and we have

been neglecting her too. Have you not noticed that she has been paler than usual lately? And a little out of spirits, don't you think so?"

He looked at her earnestly, awaiting the answer with evident uneasiness.

"Ah! monsieur has thought to remark that?"

"You have not noticed it yourself then?" he demanded anxiously.

"Me—ah yes! I have noticed it. I am not blind, monsieur."

"You have noticed it! And why did you not tell me then? why did you not tell the doctor? My God! if she should be seriously ill!"

"The doctor would not have been able to do good to her, monsieur. It will be time that will cure her, this poor cherished, and not all the ordinances of the world."

Mr. Fleming looked up quickly.

"You are keeping something back from me. You know what is the matter with her, and will not tell me."

"She has the headache, monsieur, and complains herself not to sleep well during the night."

"It is not that I mean. There is a cause for her illness which you are hiding from me. But I have a right to know it, and I will. Do you hear me? I must and will."

He spoke peremptorily, and Josephine seemed much troubled.

"I know nothing—I can divine only. And if what I divine it is something which mademoiselle would not wish that I revealed, monsieur will understand . . . . . Besides, it is possible that I deceive myself altogether. But one told me that monsieur has wished to hear me read."

"Not till I have heard all you know, all you suspect. Josephine, I believe you love your mistress?"

"Ah! if I love her, monsieur!" cried Josephine with sparkling eyes.

"Then you will keep nothing back from me that concerns her health or happiness. You think I can be of no use to her, but perhaps I have more in my power than you imagine."

"If I believed to be able to do her good" . . . murmured Josephine, putting up her apron to her eyes. "But no, that is not possible."

"Who can say what is possible and what is not? Josephine, I insist on your telling me all you know; otherwise I will speak to your mistress herself, for I will not rest till I am satisfied."

"Speak of it to her, this poor child! Ah! no, no, for the love of Heaven no—that would break the heart to her. Well, monsieur, I will tell you quite

frankly what I believe. You know not, I think, that Monsieur Philippe Ormond is come one day of the last week to see mademoiselle—it is since then that I have remarked that mademoiselle is pale and altered. Ah! monsieur understands well at present, is it not?"

There was a significance in Josephine's voice which was not lost upon Mr. Fleming. He remembered, almost for the first time, that Maud had been thrown more than once into Philip Ormond's company, and had even been rescued by him from a not inconsiderable peril; and remembering this, a ray of light was suddenly let in upon him.

"She loves him!" he cried. "Josephine, tel. me, is it so?"

Josephine inclined her head.

"Monsieur has said it. Ah! you see now for what my poor child is sad."

He was silent for a while; he had been taken altogether by surprise. Presently he asked, in quick passionate tones:

"And why should she be sad? Does he not love her too? Or has he been playing fast and loose with her? has he dared" . . . . .

Josephine hastened to pacify him.

"Ah no! he is not like that, monsieur. It is a brave young man; he loves her as—as—as she merits it, in fine; he loves her with all his heart,

and would give the universe to be able to obtain her hand. It is she who will not consent, who puts him to despair in refusing."

"What! she has refused him then? And yet you told me just now that she loved him. So! I see you know nothing about it after all."

And something like an expression of relief crossed his features.

"If I know nothing!" exclaimed Josephine indignantly. "Ah! but I know only too well. Have I not made her avow to me something of what was arrived the other day when I found her in tears, and have I not divined the rest? Ah yes! she loves him, and he also he loves her, and however she will marry him never."

"And why not?"

"For two reasons, monsieur. First, mademoiselle has decided herself that she will never quit you, and then" . . . . .

"I might have known it," he murmured in a broken voice. "My darling, my darling, I might have known it. But I will not stand in the way of her happiness; if she loves him, she shall marry him."

Josephine shook her head sadly.

"Mademoiselle will never consent—not even if you commanded it to her. She is proud, and will not marry to be despised by the friends of her husband."

"Despised! who will dare despise her?" he cried, his eyes flashing with sudden fury. "Despised!"

"It is what she fears to be, monsieur," explained Josephine in tremulous tones, "for she knows nothing of what one says. How! I would not tell her for all the world."

"What do you mean? What is it that you would not tell her?"

"What one has said to me yesterday at Hernebridge. Monsieur knows that I have been yesterday at Hernebridge to make a little visit to Madame Jenkins. Ah! I stifle when I think to it. This wicked Sir Ormond! this old miserable who says injuries—who insults my child!"

Josephine burst into a tempest of angry weeping, so violent that she did not notice the dark crimson glow that came and went and came again on Mr. Fleming's brow; else perhaps she might have remembered that excitement had been pronounced dangerous to him.

"Ha! insult her! does he insult her? And how? how?"

"He spreads himself in invectives against her, he calls her Bohemian, and impostor, and—and says that she aided the complot from the beginning, and that—that she seeks to undamage herself now by extending a snare for his son. And it is

not all; he vaunts himself that when Monsieur Philippe went to him and prayed for his aid to obtain mademoiselle's hand, he responded in saying he would like better to search his daughter in-law in the workhouse than come here for her. And—and . . . . . Just Heaven, monsieur, are you ill?"

He was leaning back in his chair gasping for breath, the veins of his forehead unnaturally distended, and his eyes strained and bloodshot. Josephine saw her mistake, and would have rushed from the room to seek Maud, but that Mr. Fleming, who retained full consciousness, made a motion with his hand that she should remain. In a minute or two, apparently as much by an exertion of will as by an involuntary effort of nature, he began to recover, and Josephine's alarm somewhat subsided.

"And so Sir Arthur does not think her good enough," he said faintly as soon as he could articulate, while a smile of deadly bitterness played across his face. "Sir Arthur will not deign to woo her for his son, will he not? What if we make him come —ha! what if we make him come?"

"Ah! if it were possible!" said Josephine with a sigh. "But it is not, and monsieur has great wrong to excite himself of the sort. Think to it no more."

He took no notice of this exhortation, and set his teeth with a look of desperate resolution.

"He *shall* come," he muttered—"he shall demand her, hat in hand. And yet, and yet" . . .

"Monsieur, be a little calm, I pray you. Remember yourself of mademoiselle."

"Yes, yes, I remember her. Josephine, leave me—I wish to be alone."

"I fear almost to quit you, monsieur," said Josephine nervously.

"No need; I am well again now. Leave me, I say. No—first one word more. You are quite sure she loves him, Josephine?"

"Ah! am I sure? As sure that I speak to you now. But monsieur will promise to me to not excite himself?"

"Give yourself no concern about me. Now go—go at once."

Josephine reluctantly obeyed, and in another moment Mr. Fleming found himself alone. He rose staggering from his chair, and began, though slowly and feebly, to pace to and fro, as was his wont when thinking more deeply than usual.

"Can I do it? can I do it? What! give her up—my one treasure, my ewe lamb! And to them, to them! Ah! how they would triumph!"

A pang of inward pain convulsed his features, and he shook his head, whispering, "I cannot."

A few more faltering steps he made, and then came to a halt in front of Maud's little work-table.

His eyes had fallen on the unfinished dressing-gown that lay folded on it, and suddenly tears rushed into them.

"Her little tender fingers!" he said, lifting a fold of the work and gazing at it with dimmed eyes. "So hard as they toil for me, and yet so cheerfully. And how she tries to get a smile from me even when her own heart is sad and heavy. Ah! my little one, how she loves me!"

And Gilbert Fleming bent down, and kissed a corner of the work only because Maud's fingers had fashioned it.

"She shall be happy," he murmured as he raised his head, "yes, she shall be happy. They will triumph, but what care I if she, my darling, triumphs too?"

He paused a while as though considering; then, with an expression of calm decision on his face, went forward to the bell and rang it.

Josephine quickly answered the summons, and found him sitting as she had left him, only with a look far more composed.

"Josephine, I am going to send you on an errand. It is an important one, and it will not do to have delay."

"It will be with pleasure. Where does monsieur wish that I go?"

"You remember one day last year, I suppose,

when you went with your mistress to the house of a poor dying woman at Laviston? Do you think you could find your way to the place again?"

"Ah! surely yes, monsieur."

"It is not that house I wish you to go to, but another close by, where a woman lives of the name of Mrs. Walker, the same whom you saw with the Pearsons that morning. You remember her?"

"Perfectly, monsieur, I should know her again from the first moment."

"Very well. Take a fly, and drive out to Laviston, and tell this Mrs. Walker that I wish to see her immediately on important business; bring her back with you if possible. Be as quick as you can, please."

"I comprehend. Monsieur will not have long time to wait."

She was going, but he called her back.

"Stay one moment. I see you have a good memory for faces, Josephine."

"That is not bad, monsieur."

"I want to ask you, then, if you remember your mistress as she was when you knew her first sixteen years ago. You can recall something of her features, I suppose?"

Josephine was almost indignant at the question.

"Monsieur thinks that I could forget! But I remember myself of all that as if it was only arrived yesterday. The dear little figure is graved on my

heart, and will rest there always. Ah! it was as that of a little angel, is it not true?"

"God knows how true it is. But I was blind and would not see it then." He drew a deep sigh, and continued: "I suppose, from what you say, that if you were shown a portrait of her as she was at that time, you would have no difficulty in recognising it."

"A portrait of my little child!" cried Josephine impetuously. "Give quickly, give quickly—where is it?"

She looked at him expectantly, evidently thinking that he was about to produce what he had spoken of.

"It is not here. But I believe that such a portrait is in existence; you will see it perhaps some day. And you will know it at once?"

"At once, at once, monsieur. Ah! it is very sure."

"That is well. Bring me my desk, if you please, before you leave."

Josephine obeyed, and then departed on her mission, leaving her master sitting at his open desk, pen in hand, not yet writing but deeply deliberating. He remained thus for some time, but at last began to write, and went on until there lay before him five notes sealed and addressed. Of these two were to be sent to Ormondsbury, and respectively bore the names of Sir Arthur Ormond and his son; a third to Hernebridge, its intended recipient being no other than Nathaniel

Digges; while the remaining two were destined for delivery in Linchester itself, being directed, one to Mr. Walford, and the other to his lawyer. With a few verbal differences all the five were nearly identical in their contents, each urgently inviting the person to whom it was addressed to call at the writer's house at three o'clock the next day, to assist in the transaction of vitally important business. In the case of Sir Arthur the appeal was necessarily worded with double earnestness, and the business was described as closely affecting the baronet's own interests.

The writing of these letters and the consideration which they involved occupied a good deal of time, and they had not been long finished when Josephine returned from her errand, and came upstairs to tell her master that Mrs. Walker was waiting below. He committed the letters to Josephine's charge, with an injunction to post them at once, and at the same time directed that Mrs. Walker should be immediately shown up. In another minute the good woman entered the room, curtseying and simpering with extraordinary energy, for, fallen though he was from his former fortunes, Mr. Fleming was still a great man in her estimation.

"Good-day, Mrs. Walker," he began, as soon as the door was closed upon her. "I am very glad you have been able to come so soon."

"I'm only too delighted to oblige such a kind liberal-dealing gentleman any ways in my power," said Mrs. Walker, not perhaps altogether without a motive for her exuberant civility. "You see, sir, I know you're one as understands that poor folk's time is their money."

"Yes, yes, I quite understand that, and intend to act accordingly too, as you shall find."

"I am quite positive you will, sir, it isn't in your nature to do different. I ain't forgot how handsome you behaved with regard to the trouble I had with minding old Mrs. Pearson, and arterwards with taking her to the asylum, which I don't deny a journey to London was a terrible ill-convenience for one sitiwated as I am, with nine children and the youngest not two, leastways she wasn't then, seeing it must be more nor a year ago now. I beg your pardon, sir, but have you heard how Mrs. Pearson is getting on?"

"There is no change in her, I believe. The doctor writes to me twice a year; she seems to be exactly in the same state as when you knew her."

"Ah! poor dear! But arter all, we couldn't expect nothing better, could we, sir? Well, it'll be always a comfort to me to think I did the best I could for her, and likewise for poor Netta what's dead and gone."

"Certainly. But it is time now that we should go to business. I have not told you yet what I want of you."

"Which I shall be but too glad to oblige you, sir, so far as in me lays," said Mrs. Walker, folding her hands and composing herself into an attitude of deep attention.

"You remember that when the woman you were speaking of just now—Janetta Pearson—died, I gave you permission to take possession of whatever you might find that had belonged to her. You acted on that permission, no doubt?"

Mrs. Walker was on the defensive instantly.

"There's no blame to me I hope, sir, if I did. You told me I might, you know, as plain as anybody could speak, not to say that the things was mine already, seeing as poor Netta promised I was to have 'em. And they was nothing but a pack of rubbish arter all, sir—worth nobody's time to trouble about, except p'raps a poor woman like me."

"You do not understand me; I am not blaming you at all. On the contrary, I am very glad to think that the things have been in the keeping of a person likely to take care of them, for I wish to ask" . . . . .

"You wouldn't want me to give any of 'em back!" cried Mrs. Walker, more on the defensive than ever. "A gentleman like you! Oh! sir, you wouldn't

have the heart to do it, let alone the lawfulness of it, would you?"

"Don't be afraid, my good woman; if you are asked to give anything up, you will be repaid its value three times over—take my word for that."

Mrs. Walker came off the defensive at this.

"I knowed you was too much the gentleman," she said, and then inclined her ear attentively to what Mr. Fleming might have to add.

"Well then, among the things belonging to Janetta Pearson have you ever come across a gold locket—mounted with pearls, I think—containing hair worked in the form of initials?"

"Gold! you don't mean to say it's gold!" exclaimed Mrs. Walker, looking a little crest-fallen at her own want of penetration.

"You have found it then!" he cried eagerly. "And you have kept it?"

"Yes, sir, for do you see I never thought of its being real. So I let my biggest girl have it to hang round her neck, seeing as how she took a liking to it. Poor Polly, she'll be sorry to have to part with it, to be sure."

"You must give her something else that she will be as well pleased with. You will be quite able to do so, for if you bring me that locket to-morrow morning you shall take home ten sovereigns in exchange for it"

"Ten sovereigns!" she ejaculated, fully restored to equanimity. "You may depend on having it, sir. I'll fetch it to you with my own hands first thing to-morrow—or this evening, if you like."

"To-morrow morning will do. But don't be in a hurry to go away, perhaps this locket is not the only thing you have found that may turn out more valuable than you have anticipated."

"There ain't nothing more, sir, I'm pretty sure of that," said Mrs. Walker, shaking her head ruefully. "There was only a trumpery lot of old clothes as would hardly do more nor fill a couple of good-sized bandboxes—nothing you'd care to so much as look at, sir."

"It is about nothing more important than a few old clothes that I wish to ask you. Among Janetta's things did you not find some evidently belonging to a child's wardrobe—a little girl's frock and pelisse" . . . . .

"And a hat trimmed with black ribbon! Yes, to be sure I did, and put 'em by for my own little 'un to grow up to, which she very near has now, the precious, and I was thinking of taking 'em into wear for her the very next Sunday as ever is. They're as good as new, sir, almost, for as I say they've been laid by ever since I had 'em, and they'd been kep very careful afore that, done up by themselves in paper with lavender a top of 'em."

"Indeed! Well, I am glad to hear of it. Put those things apart, and keep them safely until you are called to produce them, and you shall have five pounds in addition to the ten that I promised. You may go now."

"There's nothing else of poor Netta's as you'd like to have, sir?" asked Mrs. Walker, lingering in the hope of being able to effect another equally profitable negotiation. "A handkerchief, or anything like that, to keep as a remembrance? Or perhaps a lock of her hair? I did save a bit."

She was a little disappointed to find that Mr. Fleming decisively shook his head.

"I want to see nothing that was hers," he said, not without a certain severity in his tone. "Do as I have told you with the things I have spoken of, and keep the rest for yourself—they are nothing to me. Good afternoon."

Mrs. Walker understood that there was no more to be got by staying, and, again promising to do what was required of her, took leave with an abundant display of gratitude and respect.

Left alone, Mr. Fleming sank into a profound reverie—such a dream of the past and the future as must come to a thoughtful man who feels that he is on the eve of one of the great crises of his life, who knows that the bolt is launched which, when it falls, must change the whole form and texture of his

being. Long he sat and pondered thus in the waning daylight, hardly rousing himself even when, just before dusk, Josephine came in to light the fire with which his room was always warmed during the now somewhat chill autumn evenings. And when Josephine had left him, he still mused on, looking into the blaze with sad yet steady eyes, as one who understands that trouble is in store and schools himself to bear it bravely. But though there was sadness in his face, there was no bitterness; perhaps never in his life had there been an expression of such quiet repose and resignation on his features as there was now. Was it that at last his conscience had found peace?

He looked up presently, roused by the sound of a certain light footstep outside his door, and turned round to let his eyes rest with a glance of ineffable tenderness on the slender figure that immediately afterwards appeared on the threshold.

"Well, dear papa," said Maud, advancing, and laying her hand caressingly on his shoulder, "I hope you have not been very dull without me? I am almost well again now, you see; the rest has done me a great deal of good."

He drew her towards him, and scanned her countenance steadfastly by the light of the fire.

"I ought to have seen sooner how pale and wan it was," he said, as if to himself. "And these little

hands, I ought to have known sooner how they were wasting away. But all shall be well soon, my darling, all shall be well."

"That it shall, papa. Only wait till we get settled in our dear little house at Naples."

He shook his head.

"You shall be cured before then, little one." He paused an instant, then drew her nearer to him yet, and whispered: "I have found out now what has been ailing my pet."

"Indeed, papa! Nothing with a very long formidable name, I hope."

He stroked her head fondly, and continued, whispering still:

"I know now who came to see my Maud last week, and what he said to her. He shall ask you again, child, and you shall not refuse him."

She hid her face on her father's shoulder in distress and humiliation unutterable.

"Papa, papa, do not speak of it, for pity's sake; it kills me only to hear of it. It was cruel of them to tell you—oh! how cruel it was!"

"Do not weep—my little one, my darling, do not weep, or I must weep too. And you have no cause; believe me you have none. I would not have spoken now of what I knew if I could not give you comfort, if I could not tell you that all is going to be well."

"All is well, papa—as well as it ever can be. How should it be otherwise than well while we are together, and loving each other as we do?"

"All is well, but it shall be better yet—for you. I have power to bring them to your feet, Maud, and I will."

She glanced up into his face with a look of terror; she was afraid that his mind was wandering anew.

"Nay, I know well what I say—I was never calmer in my life. Sit down here at my feet; I have something to say to you, something to tell you. So, give me your hand, my darling, and listen, and bear with me if you can."

She sat down on a little stool close to his chair, somewhat re-assured by his manner, and, laying her hand in his, looked up lovingly into his face, with an attempt to smile through the tears that the fire-light showed sparkling in her eyes.

"I am listening, dear papa."

But instead of beginning a connected speech, he put his arms round her neck and fell forward on her shoulder, exclaiming:

"No, no, not to-night—I cannot do it to-night. This one evening more, Maud, this one evening more."

"How this one evening, dear papa?" she asked gently, again beginning to be apprehensive.

"Nothing, dear. I mean—yes, I mean—that this

evening we are to be very happy. We will sit here by the fire, and you shall take up your work and talk to me while I watch and listen. And you will sing me the songs I love best, and we will hold high holiday together."

"Indeed we will, papa," she answered gaily, again re-assured by finding him in such good spirits, and striving to show herself cheerful too. "And we will talk of our journey, and our little house, and" . . . .

A shade came over his face.

"No, we will rather talk of the pleasant days we have spent here since you came to be my nurse. We know not what the future may have in store for us, Maud, but we know that in the past—since we have been here together—we have been very happy."

"As you will, dearest. But you know we are going to be very happy too," she persisted.

"Yes, very, very happy—for to-night."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SECRET TOLD.

THE next morning Maud rose feeling better than she had done for some time past. Her sleep had been more tranquil than usual, and she was, moreover, still under a pleasurable impression left by the previous evening, during which her father had seemed so well and had sat up with her so long in cheerful and affectionate converse that it appeared to her one of the happiest she had ever spent. She was therefore the more disappointed to find him, as she did, looking haggard and unslept. In spite of his assurances that there was nothing the matter, she could not help fearing that the hitherto steady progress of his recovery had received a check. Her uneasiness increased as the morning advanced and there began to be visible in his manner a certain unwonted restlessness and excitability; and the apprehensions which had momentarily crossed her the evening before, that his intellect was again becoming unsettled, took possession of her anew.

He was by turns dreamily absent and nervously impatient, now absorbed in reverie, now consulting his watch and moving unquietly about the room. These symptoms increased rather than diminished as the day passed on, and especially towards the middle of the afternoon became so marked as to redouble her anxiety.

It was about this time that she was surprised by the intelligence that Mr. Walford and Mr. Puddicombe were waiting below, and still more surprised to find that her father intended to go down to them.

"You must not think of such a thing, dear papa," she expostulated. "It is very polite of them to call, but I dare say they hardly expected to see you, and we will send down a message to say that you have never left your room yet."

"No, no, I must see them, I will see them," he answered; and he spoke so decidedly that she did not venture to remonstrate further, judging that opposition would only have the effect of injuriously exciting him. But though there was thus nothing to prevent him from going downstairs at once, he seemed to be unaccountably bent on lingering. He looked at his watch, twisted and untwisted the chain, toyed with Maud's scissors and thimble, looked at his watch again, and in short seemed to have forgotten the very existence of the visitors

whom he had just professed himself so anxious to see.

She was pondering whether or not she should remind him that he was waited for, when Josephine entered the room, looking very much flushed and flurried, and holding in her hand two cards which she silently laid before Mr. Fleming. Maud was standing at his elbow, and, glancing down, saw with such a shock of surprise as she had seldom before experienced, that they bore the names of Sir Arthur Ormond and his son.

"They are both here, then?" cried Mr. Fleming breathlessly. "The old man too? Ha! Josephine?"

"Yes, monsieur."

His eyes dilated with a strange look of triumph.

"I am glad, I am glad. It would have been the same either way, but I had set my heart on his coming, and I was afraid he would not."

And indeed it had needed all Philip's persuasions to induce his father to obey a summons so unlooked-for, the rather that Lady Rosamond and her sister were expected to arrive on their promised visit to the Hall that very evening. But Philip had taken care to represent strongly the possible importance of the business so mysteriously referred to in Mr. Fleming's letter; and besides, Sir Arthur had instinctively understood that Lady Rosamond would much more easily excuse him for being absent at the moment of

her arrival than for churlishly refusing an urgent request indited from the sick-room of a fallen enemy. And thus it came to pass that he accompanied his son to Gilbert Fleming's house.

Meanwhile Maud looked at her father in blank bewilderment.

"Papa! papa! how is this? You knew that they were coming?"

"I wrote to bid them come. I have sworn that the old man shall ask you to be his son's wife, and he shall."

Maud wrung her hands in agony; for a moment the sense of humiliation was so acute that everything else was forgotten, even her fears for her father's sanity.

"You wrote to them!" she cried in a voice tremulous with pain—"you wrote to them! How shall I bear it? Papa, Josephine, help me—how shall I bear it? Oh! this is dreadful. Papa, how could you do it?"

He bent his eyes searchingly and sadly on her face.

"You are angry with me, Maud?"

She passionately flung her arms round his neck.

"Papa darling! Angry! Oh no, no!"

"No, I am sure you are not. I do not think you could be angry with me, Maud."

"Of course not, papa."

"Not for anything that I had done or could do—ha? You have borne so much from me already and yet forgiven me, that I think you could forgive me anything, is it not so?"

"How can you speak of such things, darling?"

"But you could—could you not?"

"You know I could—a thousand times over."

She clung to him in tender apprehension—all her feelings of mortification swallowed up in love for her father and the fears suggested by the strangeness of his conduct.

"It is well, little one, it is well. Let us go down to them at once. Josephine, you must come too."

"Papa!" exclaimed Maud, recoiling in terror. "No, no, it is impossible. You forget—you do not think" . . . .

"I have thought of everything. Come, Maud, we must not make them wait."

"I cannot see them—I cannot, indeed. And you must not either, papa; you are ill—far too ill."

"I am not ill; I must see them, and so must you. I understand; you think I am not in my right senses, but you are mistaken. I have something to tell Sir Arthur Ormond and his son — something which I wish to tell in the presence of witnesses. Therefore it is that I have asked Walford and his

lawyer to be here; they have known me for years, and will understand whether I am speaking truth or falsehood. And Nathaniel Digges—he is coming too; he has shown himself your friend, and as your friend I judged that he had a right to be present."

A well-known knock sounding from below came at that moment to confirm his words. It was evident that, whether or not Gilbert Fleming's reason wavered, his thoughts and acts were at least not without a certain coherence. But did it waver? there was something in the clear steady tones of his voice that made Maud begin to hope she had been mistaken.

"Maud, you must go down with me; without you I have no strength, no courage. It may be that I have not many more favours to ask of you, and if you have any regard for my wishes you will not deny me this one."

She could not refuse longer, and, unable to speak in her trepidation at the prospect of what awaited her, bowed her head in token of acquiescence. Mr. Fleming paused for an instant while he drew forth from his desk something which he put into his pocket—it was the locket which had been brought to him that morning from Laviston—and then came forward to take hold of Maud's cold hand and lead her from the room.

They went down together, Josephine following.

Maud was faint and trembling, so that without assistance she could scarcely have stood upright, but her father's arm supported her; excitement seemed to have endowed him with preternatural force. But presently he was once more transformed into the feeble invalid; it was when Josephine at his bidding had opened the parlour door, and he found himself in the presence of those whom his summons had assembled. As though he had been a criminal appearing before his judges, he trembled violently and staggered; and Maud, her strength returning with her father's need for it, had to lead him forward to a chair. Here he sank down, while she stood by pale as death and palpitating in every nerve. His sudden display of agitation made her fear more than ever that he was acting under the influence of an over-heated brain, and she momentarily expected that something would occur to overwhelm her with cruel shame and humiliation. Yet she would not desert her father, but remained standing by his side, with her hand laid lovingly in his, and an imploring glance cast towards Philip Ormond as though entreating him to believe that she was not there of her own free will. For though she had not dared to lift her eyes on entering the room, a sure instinct told her where to look for Philip. He was sitting next his father, and on her appearance had made a movement as if about to spring forward to greet her.

He had checked himself, restrained by the presence of strangers, and also by that of his father, whom he feared to provoke into an open manifestation of displeasure; but the tenderness of the glance with which he met hers assured her that his feelings were unchanged since last they had parted in this room, and the assurance was not without comfort.

Mr. Fleming leaned back in his chair as though to rest; then, somewhat recovering, drew himself up and swept his eyes steadily round the room.

"I am sorry to have made you wait," he began in a feeble yet clear voice, while a smile faint and forced flickered over his features, "but as you perceive, I am still something of an invalid. And my business with you is not such as a man is usually inclined to perform in a hurry, seeing that I have called you here (some of you scarcely my friends, I am afraid) in order that I may humble myself to the very dust before you. You wonder to hear this, I dare say—you know that I have not been wont to practise the virtue of humility. There has been a struggle, I confess; but when one loves well, hard things become easy. And I love my little Maud here with my whole heart."

He carried to his lips the hand that lay trembling in his and kissed it tenderly. Maud hardly knew what he did; her whole nature was engrossed in a shuddering sense of her deep abasement.

"How should I not love her—the guardian angel that has saved me, body and soul, the sweet companion that has promised to wear out her life in making mine happy, with whom I had hoped to spend years of peace and gladness, dying at last in her arms! How indeed should I not love her? And I do love her—dearly, truly, how well you yourselves may judge when you hear that for her sake (she little knows what I am going to say) I have resolved to give her up."

Philip started impetuously to his feet, no longer able to control himself.

"Yes, to me, to me, who will cherish her more than light and life. Oh! my Maud, my darling, why do you turn away? have you not heard your father say that he gives you to me?"

Surely the crisis of her humiliation had come now. She threw herself on her father's neck, and, seeking to shelter herself in his arms, sobbed out:

"Papa, have mercy. No more, no more."

But, save that he folded her fondly to his breast, he took no notice, and went on:

"I am willing that she should be yours, Mr. Ormond, and if it depended on me, she should be. But it does not; if you would have her, you must demand her from another than me."

"From whom then?" asked Philip impatiently.

"From her mother, LADY ROSAMOND CARLETON."

Maud's worst apprehensions were confirmed. She had feared before, but now she was sure, that her father must be delirious.

"You see how it is!" she cried, turning to the others with a look of agonised appeal. "Help me, help me, for I know not what to do."

"I am not mad," he went on calmly. "This is she who sixteen years ago was missed from the vessel 'British Queen' and was supposed to have fallen overboard—my wife's niece and the daughter of Herbert Carleton."

There was something in the accent with which these words were spoken which made every listener feel that they were not the utterance of insanity, but of a cool and clear understanding. An electric thrill ran through the little assembly. Philip Ormond's face flushed with sudden hope and gladness; Sir Arthur silently put out his hand to seek that of his son; Mr. Walford gazed at his former partner in speechless wonderment; Mr. Puddicombe caught at his note-book to make an entry; Nathaniel hastily drew forth his handkerchief; while Josephine could not refrain from sobbing outright. As for Maud, she had sunk down on her knees by the side of Mr. Fleming's chair, and remained thus, unable to speak or move or even to think, so utterly stunned

was she by an announcement which seemed incredible, yet which she knew not how to disbelieve.

"I think you are convinced already," said Mr. Fleming, looking round to see the effect of his words, "but the truth must be made clear to you by understanding as well as by feeling. I can explain everything, and I will—for her sake I will—whatever you may think of me when the explanation is complete. To begin at the beginning; there is a simple fact, innocent in itself, but out of which all the rest grew, and with which none of you are yet acquainted. You all remember, I dare say, that I came home from India at or about the time of Herbert Carleton's death and of the loss of his daughter; it may be even that Mr. Walford may recollect that I had a business transaction to manage for the firm I had been serving in India which obliged me to return *viâ* France. But I suppose that neither he nor any one else ever suspected that I and my little daughter came to England in the same vessel which was bringing over Lady Rosamond's child from Havre."

A hushed murmur of surprise ran round the room.

"Yes, so it was; all that has happened, my guiltiness and the misery of others—my own misery through weary years—was determined by an accident, brought about by an unlucky chance."

A look of bitterness crossed his face, and a brief struggle seemed to take place within him; but in another moment he continued, with steady, almost dreamy, composure.

"I have no right to rail at chance, after all. Chance, or what we call chance, is a chief agent in the external circumstances of all our lives—he is no philosopher who holds that it is not; and besides, pure chance does not form our characters. The train must be laid before the casually fallen spark explodes it, and I had perverted my nature by long nursing of evil passions before the accident which gave me an opportunity of crime could have betrayed me into committing it. Temptation generally comes to us more or less by chance, but the weakness that yields to it never. At least I know that it was thus with me."

He sighed heavily, and for a few seconds was lost in gloomy retrospection.

"Ay, it was not by accident, but by my own free will that I had given myself up for years to feelings of deadly unforgiving hatred against those who, as I conceived, had wronged me—God pardon me, for I begin to understand now that even there I may have erred. How deadly and unforgiving that hatred was, those who knew me best can hardly have guessed, and I shudder now to remember. Enough that even death had no power to disarm

or soften it. The night before leaving Havre I learned from the newspapers that Herbert Carleton was dead, but I had no touch of compassion for the wife he had left behind him. I think I hated her more than ever, for her child now stood alone between mine and a rich inheritance. You see I extenuate nothing of my sin."

He looked down at Maud as he uttered the last words, but her face was buried in her hands, and except for an occasional convulsively drawn breath there was nothing to show that she heard or understood aught of what was spoken in her presence.

"I and my child were not travelling alone. We were accompanied by two women—a mother and daughter—who had been in my employment in India, and of whose fidelity I thought so highly that I had resolved to retain their services even at the cost of bringing them both to England. The mother—a half-caste from Ceylon, and the widow of a respectable non-commissioned officer—had entered my household about a year before I left India, to take care of my delicate child, and soon afterwards had persuaded me to engage her daughter also, on the plea that the girl would be a useful assistant in the nursery. They both performed their duties in a way that left me nothing to desire, professing an extraordinary attachment to their little charge, and tending her with a zeal and assiduity which won my

complete and undoubting confidence. I did not then know what I discovered afterwards—that the mother had from the first set her heart on inducing me to marry her daughter. The girl was very handsome, I believe—so I was told at least, for I had no eyes for any woman's beauty then—and the ambition to raise her above her station ruled every thought and action of the mother's life. And this scheming fiend it was whom at that time I trusted more implicitly than any one else in the world, into whose apparently sympathising ear in moments of excitement I had even the weakness to pour the story of my own and my child's wrongs. I was easy to be deceived then, both by myself and others."

His lips parted in a bitter smile; then, after a brief interval of silence, he went on:

"We had not many minutes put off from Havre when this woman, who had witnessed my agitation the evening before on learning Herbert Carleton's death, came up and told me she had just discovered that the little heiress of Carleton Grange was travelling home in the same vessel with ourselves, accompanied only by a gossiping nursemaid who had been her informant. I hardly know how I answered—with a curse, I suppose, for the bare notion of having the child so near made me angry. But this I know—that till the woman spoke again I was as innocent

of any thought of turning the accident to account as any of you whom I am addressing. I was wicked —the result proved that I was—but not so wicked that I could have done a great crime without a devil at my elbow to prompt me to it. Perhaps you will not believe this after what I have confessed, but it is true—indeed it is."

There was a strangely pleading tone in his voice as he spoke, and again he glanced down at Maud. She did not speak or move—she knew not that he was looking at her—but a slight murmur escaped her, and Mr. Fleming's face was momentarily lit up with a ray of pleasure.

"But a devil was there in the shape of yonder woman, and by her lips he suggested to me that if we could find means to get this child into our possession, my own little one would stand first in succession to the property of which her share had, as it seemed to me, been treacherously filched for the benefit of her cousin. Again I hardly remember what I said or how I felt. The proposition shocked me a little, I believe; still not so much as to make me indignant with the proposer. I repelled it, but chiefly as being utterly absurd and impracticable; and the tempter was encouraged to go on and show me how it was practicable. Her plan was that, in the confusion of disembarking, her daughter Janetta should carry the child on shore, and travel with her

at once to London—an impression being meanwhile produced that the little creature had fallen overboard, so that suspicion might be effectually diverted from her real fate. With the management of this part of the scheme its inventor was ready wholly to charge herself, undertaking not only to raise the alarm that the child was in the water, but to stand the brunt of all subsequent interrogation, and even to remain for some days at Southampton to answer inquiry and establish the credibility of her testimony. No assistance from me was to be required at any stage of the plot—all that I had to do being to give the two women permission to make the attempt, and to hold myself and my daughter aloof from them during the day, so as to let it appear that they were each travelling alone. This was the plan—the devilish concoction of a brain compounded of European strength of purpose and Asiatic cunning."

He spoke these last words in a tone of suppressed wrath. Evidently he had not even yet forgiven his tempter.

"I saw now that the scheme was practicable enough, but I still rejected it. I do not think I had any compunction for the misery the infant's loss might cause its mother—I hated her too much for that. It was simply that the meanness and trickery of the project were revolting to my pride. But the

woman who was my evil genius went on arguing—reminding me of my child (she knew well where I was most vulnerable), of the injustice that had been done to her, and of the brilliant prospects which would open to her on the removal of that other. The poisoned words did not fail of their effect. At last I told myself—I have never been at a loss for a sophism when I wanted one—that I had actually no right to let my scruples of pride or conscience stand between my daughter and the affectionate fidelity which thus spontaneously offered to redress her wrongs and restore her to her proper place in the world. You understand now that the moment of yielding was not far off. The woman still pressed for my consent; I gave it—and once given I was ashamed to retract it—and she left me triumphantly, to prepare the way for the execution of her plot by ingratiating herself into the confidence of the nurse-maid. How well the plot succeeded I have no need to tell."

He shuddered, and pressed his handkerchief on his brow, on which beads of moisture had gradually been gathering.

"I know not exactly when I began to repent of what I had permitted to be done. Perhaps it was when I heard the cries of the girl who had been in charge of the missing child. I remember it came upon me almost as a surprise to witness

so much weeping and wailing of which I had been the cause. But I did begin to repent very soon, and repentance gradually became more and more poignant, until one day it culminated with the discovery that the woman who had led me into crime had been actuated, not by love for my little Maud, but by a desire to establish a hold on me by which she might serve her own ambition. For no sooner had she finished her work at Southampton, and come to London to join her daughter—who had meanwhile been living with the stolen child in obscure lodgings near mine—than she threw off the mask, and claimed as a reward for her services that I should make Janetta my wife. I refused indignantly. I was ready to pay her and her daughter what I could for keeping my secret and taking care of the helpless infant whom we had deprived of its natural protectors; but more I would not do, and she understood that I would not. She pretended at last to be satisfied, and we parted; still I saw that she was overflowing with dark vindictive malice, and for a while I lived in terror of what she might do to revenge herself. I know not how it would have ended, but that, as a consequence of the excitement and disappointment she had undergone, she was seized with a severe illness which at one time threatened her life, and which terminated in hopeless idiocy. Thus the daughter was left the

sole depositary of the secret, aud with her I found it comparatively easy to deal. Poor Janetta!—I will not speak too hardly of her. She was led on by another with a stronger will than her own, and I have sometimes thought to have seen reason for fancying that ambition may not have been the only motive which induced her to fall in with her mother's views. Be that as it may, the discovery that those women had been working, not in the interests of my child, but in their own, made me loathe more than ever the snare into which they had betrayed me. I still tried to persuade myself that the wrongs I had received from Lady Rosamond and her husband gave me a moral right to do what I had done; yet with all this I wished it undone with my whole heart, would have undone it if by any means it had been possible without making confession of my guilt. But I could not give up the stolen child to her mother without standing forth to all men as an accomplice in her abduction, and to that I could not bring myself, I who had set my heart on achieving the world's honour and respect."

And his lip curled as though in grim contempt for the memory of his own aspirations.

"Then followed what you already know, the death of my poor infant—the little innocent angel for whose sake I had made myself so guilty. If that trial was sent me as a punishment, it was a punishment whose

pain was almost commensurate with my offence. When it came, I thought I never could know comfort more, nor have I known it till lately."

And yet again he let his eyes rest for a moment on the kneeling figure by his side.

"When I had recovered a little from the first paroxysm of my grief, it occurred to me that now I had an opportunity of repairing in some sort the wrong that I had done, by restoring to her inheritance the poor child who by my means had been made a nameless outcast. I will not say that in the considerations which determined me there was no leaven of self-interest, no prompting of mortified pride at the idea of seeing my enemies rule over the estates which had seemed destined to pass under my control; I am afraid many motives contributed to the ultimate decision. But the desire to satisfy my conscience by an act of partial justice was one of them, or I could never have brought myself to acknowledge as my own the child of Herbert and Rosamond Carleton. You who know me will perhaps believe that I am not all sordid and ignoble."

Once more there was a pleading tone in his voice as he looked towards Maud.

"I wrote to Janetta from the Continent, directing her to meet me at Dover with her charge, and to prepare for moving with her mother into the

country immediately afterwards, so as to avoid the suspicions which the little girl's absence might otherwise excite. But you have all heard how, in spite of this precaution, Francis Godfrey's father discovered part, though not the whole, of my secret. He found out that my own child had died, and that I had substituted another in her place, who, as he had taken into his head, could be no other than my illegitimate daughter by the girl Janetta. It was not my interest to undeceive him on this point, or I could have done so easily enough; for there were plenty of witnesses living — there are no doubt plenty living still—who could prove that Janetta never left her home in Ceylon till she entered my service during the last year of my residence in India. But it suited me to leave him in his error, and I did so—only too glad that he had fallen into it; and, as you know, I succeeded in bribing him to keep so much of my secret as he had discovered. The consciousness of being in his power was at first a terrible thorn in my flesh; but—till he betrayed me on his deathbed to his son—he adhered strictly to the terms of his bargain, and, finding that he did not trouble me, I gradually forgot him, or at least ceased altogether to think of him. It is strange what use can do for us. Save for its reconciling power I must have gone mad long ago."

Use had done much for him indeed, and yet the

premature marks of age on his face and the settled look of pain about his mouth showed that there had been a limit to its healing virtues.

"I was somewhat easier in my conscience when I was able to reply to its reproaches that the child who was my wife's niece had suffered no injury so far as worldly prospects were concerned, being now reinstated in her rightful position as heiress of Carleton Grange. But though I was glad that I had rendered her this justice, though I determined to do everything for her that a guardian can do towards securing the happiness and welfare of his ward, I did not cease to dislike, ay, almost to hate her. I did not even try to do otherwise. She was the daughter of those whom I regarded as my enemies, she had succeeded to the name of my dead child, I was conscious of having done her cruel wrong, and for these offences I could not forgive her —there were times when I could scarcely endure even her innocent presence. Thus I felt towards her through all her childhood; thus I felt towards her still when, after a ten years' separation, she came to live with me at the Grange. If she had not been what she was, she must have hated me too."

He paused to cast on the fair bent head beside him a look of unspeakable tenderness.

"But she loved me, and gradually her sweetness

and affection melted the hardness of my nature. When I lost her I was surprised by finding that I had almost learned to love her."

His voice quivered with emotion, and some moments passed before he could proceed.

"And then she came back to me, came to comfort me in the hour of my need with her unshaken love, and I was conquered quite; conquered in such sort that from that time she has been my beloved child, dearer to me even than my own, so dear that for her sake I am content to give her up—ay, and to humble myself in dust and ashes in her sight and the sight of all the world."

He ceased, and for a minute there was silence in the room. The narrative just ended had impressed all too profoundly for any to be able to comment on it; while she whom it principally concerned, though hearing everything, had heard as in a dream, and was so stunned and overwhelmed that she had not even power to look up. For all felt that the confession they had listened to was word for word true; the voice and manner of the narrator made doubt impossible.

"Yes, I see you believe me," he said presently, "but you shall have proofs as well as explanations. The world is apt to be suspicious—ask Mr. Puddicombe yonder if it is not—and there may be those who will think, or pretend to think, that what I have

said is an invention which I have trumped up for the benefit of a daughter whom I love. Fortunately I am not obliged to ask belief for my own unsupported assertion. Lady Rosamond will doubtless be able to identify the clothes worn by her child when she was lost; and these will be produced by the woman whom I sent for yesterday, a Mrs. Walker of Laviston, who on Janetta's death took possession of her effects. And here is a locket, also worn by the child that day, which the same woman brought to me this morning, and which, from its state of preservation, can evidently never have been exposed to the action of water. Sir Arthur Ormond, I surrender it to your care; yours shall be the pleasure of delivering it to Lady Rosamond."

He handed the locket to the old baronet as he spoke. And Sir Arthur, in receiving it, was not too proud to murmur a few words which sounded like the acknowledgment of a courtesy.

"The preservation of that locket and of the clothes in Mrs. Walker's keeping is the best service which that woman—Janetta's mother—ever rendered me," said Mr. Fleming with a faint smile. "She would not part with them because their possession constituted an additional hold over me; and, after the illness which put an end to her plotting, Janetta evaded all my inquiries concerning them so obstinately that I was obliged to abandon in despair my

endeavours to obtain them. I do not know with certainty what her motives were, but I owe it to her memory to say that I often feared that she had thoughts of confessing her crime and doing justice to those whom it had injured. Indeed it was for this reason that, on coming to live at Linchester, instead of sending her as I should have wished to the corner of the earth the most remote from me, I established her at a village in the neighbourhood, where I should be able to see her from time to time, and influence her by personal argument, or, if necessary, by personal entreaty. Yes, I had much power to influence her, I know; and, divining why this was, I can understand how she may have committed the great crime of her life without being of a nature wholly corrupt."

He paused a little sadly. It was manifest that he thought less bitterly of the daughter who had been the instrument of the plot than of the mother who had been its prime mover.

"She died in the summer of last year, and for the moment I breathed freely, feeling myself relieved from a terrible danger. I had always been afraid of a deathbed confession; with how much reason I knew when, on hurrying to her cottage in obedience to the doctor's summons, I found that she had apparently been on the brink of a disclosure which not I, but death, had come in time to interrupt. I then

made another effort to get into my possession the proofs after which I had so long sought. But a neighbour of Janetta's who had nursed her in her illness had constituted herself universal legatee, and urged her claims so pertinaciously that I shrank from exciting suspicion by insisting too strongly on my right to interfere in the disposal of the property. Besides, as I asked myself, what harm could be done by a senseless trinket and a few old clothes—even supposing them not to have been already destroyed or lost—in the hands of one having no clue to the secret with which they were connected? So I gave up my point, little thinking how thankful I should one day have cause to be that I had not carried it."

Yes, he was thankful; it was impossible to look on him and not understand that.

"But this is not all. I have living witnesses too—one indeed who will not open her lips to give evidence, but who will corroborate the truth of my story none the less. On Janetta's death I sent her mother to an asylum in the neighbourhood of London; let Lady Blanche Arden visit her there, and she will easily identify the Mrs. Roberts who so obligingly waited at Southampton to answer inquiries as to the manner of the supposed accident, and who externally is but little changed since then. And you, Josephine, will recognise the portrait which I

believe Lady Rosamond possesses of her lost child as a likeness of your mistress as she was when you knew her first, sixteen years ago, in the character of my daughter Maud Fleming. Oh that I could call her daughter still!"

A heavy groan accompanied the last words—the groan of a strong man in the extremity of bodily or mental pain. Then it was that, for the first time since the revelation which had so overwhelmed her, Maud raised her head and looked up into the face of him whom it was no longer her duty to love and reverence. Her features were pale and rigid as marble, but he seemed to gather hope from their expression, for his eyes flashed with a ray of joy, and in a voice trembling with eagerness he cried:

"May I? may I? Oh! tell me if I may."

She had not yet recovered from the stunning influence of the blow that had prostrated her, for she seemed at first hardly to understand his appeal, and fixed her eyes on him with a confused bewildered air, as of a somnambulist suddenly recalled to the waking world. But gradually the look of passionate entreaty with which her gaze was returned appeared to find its way to her heart and rouse her nature to responsive intelligence. The expression of wondering perplexity wore away from her face, and a deep earnest light began to shine forth

from her eyes, still fastened intently on those of Mr. Fleming, as though drawing from his a full comprehension of the truth that had at first been but half understood. Presently she rose feebly to her feet, and, casting on him a glance full of infinite tenderness, whispered the one word, "Father."

She attempted to hold forth her hand, but a violent dizziness seized her, so that she tottered and must have fallen had not Philip Ormond rushed forward and caught her fainting in his arms.

"My Maud!" he cried, straining her rapturously to his heart. "Oh! look up; do you not know that you are mine—mine for ever now?"

"And mine," added Sir Arthur—"my dear daughter, if she will so far forgive me as to let me call her such."

And with reverential courtesy the old man stooped to kiss the hand which hung drooping by the side of the unconscious form that even Philip's words had failed to re-animate.

In the mean time Mr. Fleming looked on with a countenance full of exultation.

"Ah! you are willing at last that she should be your daughter? I thought it would be so. And yet what she is now, that she was when you rejected and vilified her."

For an instant his glance rested sternly on

Sir Arthur's abashed face; then his expression softened, and he advanced a step towards Maud, who still lay unconscious in her lover's arms.

"But she is not all yours yet; for a little longer she shall be mine. Have you not heard her call me father? Oh yes! mine for a little longer. Maud, my child, my loved one, shall it not be so?"

She opened her eyes at the sound of that familiar voice, and as they encountered those of the speaker they lit up with a feeble smile. Mr. Fleming held out his arms, and presently Philip felt that Maud made a movement to release herself. He did not oppose her, knowing what it was she sought, and in another moment she had fallen on the neck of him whom she had so long deemed her father, clinging to him as closely and as tenderly as though she had deemed him her father still.

For a time neither could speak, but at last Mr. Fleming said:

"Shall we leave them for a little while? They need not grudge you to me, Maud—they may see you again as often as they will, but I . . . . Will you come, little one?"

She answered by twining her arm in his; and, linked together, they passed from the room, Mr. Fleming casting back, as he left it thus accompanied, a look which seemed almost of triumph

at those before whom he had that day so deeply abased himself. What mattered it how harshly they judged him, if Maud was willing to go forth with him hanging on his arm ?

CHAPTER XV.

THE JOURNEY TAKEN.

"YOU forgive me, then? Child, child, is it possible?"

They were alone, Gilbert Fleming and the daughter of Lady Rosamond Carleton—alone in the chamber where for weeks she had nursed and tended him, bringing him back by her watchful loving devotion from the very gates of death. She was sitting on a chair on which in sheer weakness she had fallen on entering the room, and he was standing before her, gazing into her face with anxious inquiring look as though seeking to read his fate.

She lifted her truthful eyes to his, and in them there was nought of anger or reproach—nought but love and tenderness unutterable. Then she rose, and, putting her arms about him, nestled her head caressingly on his shoulder.

"Father—dear, dear father!"

"You call me that still? knowing what you say, you call me that still?"

"And always will—always. Never anything but that, either in word or thought. My father, my own beloved father."

He drew her close and closer to him, and his whole face and bearing became transfigured as with an expression of silent joy and thankfulness. Presently a cloud seemed to overspread his gladness, for his countenance grew troubled again, but for some moments he did not utter what was upon his mind. At length, with what appeared a painful effort, he brought himself to speak, and asked, doubtfully and with hesitation:

"And your mother—Lady Rosamond—will she ever forgive me, do you think? But no, no, it is impossible."

"Papa, she will—I am sure of it. Oh! darling, be sure of it too. I know what she is, and I will answer for her as for myself."

"Then indeed she is the angel that you deem her, and worthy to be your mother. Maud—I must call you by that name still—I shall never see her, but you will tell her that no sinner ever besought pardon more humbly than I beseech hers, not for my deeds alone, but for every thought by which I have wronged her."

"And she will tell you herself that all is for-

gotten. Oh yes! papa, you shall see her—see her many, many times."

"No, little one, no," he said, shaking his head. "Yet your promise of her forgiveness is a precious balm which, wherever I go, will be a healer and a comforter. I shall set out on my journey now with peace in my heart."

"Your journey—what journey?" she asked, looking up startled.

"The journey that we were to have made together, and which I am now to make alone," he answered in an unsteady voice. "I leave England to-morrow."

"You shall not. Papa, dearest papa, what are you thinking of? Are we not to be together all our lives long? I will never, never let you go from me."

"I must. Child, seek not to argue with me—you will but make parting more bitter. I have pondered my future well, and my plans are all laid. After to-day I shall never see you more, though I pray God that I may hear of you, and hear that you are happy. You will be married to a husband who I think deserves you as well as any man can."

"Not if I am to leave you," she cried, clinging to him desperately. "Nothing shall make me give you up, papa."

He looked down at her with eyes from which

shone forth ineffable tenderness, blended with infinite sorrow.

"Child, you forget that you owe your duty now to another than me. Not me, but your mother, you must henceforward study how to make happy."

For an instant she was silent, involuntarily recognising the truth of his words. But she would not stay to think, and answered earnestly:

"She cannot be happy if I am miserable; and miserable I must be if you are living alone and in exile. Oh! papa, stay with us; those who are my friends cannot but be yours too."

Again he sadly shook his head.

"You speak you know not what, as you will understand when you are calmer. There are wrongs which, even if they are forgiven, can never be forgotten—not at least in this world—and that which I have done to your mother is one of them. The very conventionalities of society would suffice to make it impossible that she should ever count me among her friends. Press me no further, child—it must be as I have said."

Once more her silence rendered unwilling homage to the force of his argument. But though she instinctively felt that his words were not to be gainsaid, she still could not bring herself to acknowledge it, and cried out in blind terror:

"No, no, no. Oh! papa, how can you be so cruel?"

"There is no cruelty in speaking the truth."

"It is not the truth, it cannot be the truth. Oh! do you not know that if it were I must be wretched? How can I not be wretched thinking of you living a lonely life far away from me?"

"Why then, you must not think of me—I cannot give you better counsel. And yet I would not have you quite forget me. Think of me sometimes, but only as a memory; let it be as though I had died."

"Papa!"

"It must be so, Maud. And now leave me for a while. I am weary, and must rest."

Weary indeed he was. With the gradual subsidence of the excitement which had given him strength to make the revelation of that day, the effect of his exertions began to tell on him; and now Maud, attentively observing him, saw that his face was very pale and wearing an expression of excessive lassitude. She drew his arm through hers, and led him to his accustomed chair by the bedside; then, kneeling on the footstool before him, said imploringly:

"Father, those were unkind words you spoke just now, and you must unspeak them. I cannot forget you, or be happy believing that you are

miserable. You must feel that I cannot. Oh! papa, have pity—say that I may hope to have you always near me, to be always in the midst of those I love, knowing that for my sake they are friends. Will you not say it, papa?"

He remained a few moments looking at her in silence; then, with a sudden impulse of tenderness, bent down and kissed her.

"My darling, my darling! Well, perhaps some day it may be as you wish."

She rose and embraced him delightedly, believing that at last she had prevailed.

"And now, child, leave me for an hour or two; I am very, very tired. Ay, smooth the cushion—I shall rest the better on a cushion smoothed by you."

"Shall I draw down the blind, papa? You will be able to sleep perhaps."

"I am not sleepy—only tired. No, keep it as it is—the sun will set brightly this evening, and I love to watch it. Kiss me, little one, and good-bye."

She obeyed, and was about to leave the room when, just as her hand was on the door, she was recalled.

"Maud."

"Papa dear?"

"Kiss me once more, my pet—once more."

She fancied that his voice sounded more faint and faltering than it had done a minute before, and hurried back, asking anxiously:

"Are you well, papa? Would it not be better that I should stay with you?"

"I would rather be alone—I want to think. Nay, I am well—very well. Good-bye, and God bless my darling."

"Good-bye. And oh! papa, believe me, if they love me, they will be your friends and you shall be theirs. We shall all be happy, and peace and confidence will be among us."

She pressed her lips on his fondly and lingeringly, and left the room with a step almost buoyant, persuading herself, with the natural sanguineness of youthful spirits, that all must be as she so ardently desired.

Left alone, Gilbert Fleming sat for some time with his eyes fastened on the door by which she had departed. When at length he withdrew them, it was to fix his gaze on a luminous tract of western sky where the last rays of the sinking sun were disappearing from view behind the old-fashioned gables of the neighbouring High Street. With his elbow resting on Maud's little work-table which stood beside his chair, he leaned his cheek on his hand, and bent forward to watch the gradually declining beams, muttering to himself

as the last golden speck of brightness became invisible:

"Yes, in the future life; if it be God's will, all shall be as she says in the future life."

And then, with the red glow of the sunset shining upon his face and his look turned heavenward, his lips began forming themselves in unbreathed and inaudible syllables, moving earnestly and reverently as though in prayer.

Maud had meanwhile hastened to her little bed-chamber, where, for the first time since listening to Mr. Fleming's narrative, she found herself alone and with an opportunity for calm reflection. Strange what a whirl of conflicting feelings reflection stirred within her, dividing her faculties between pleasure and pain, each exquisite of its kind but for the alloying presence of the other. To be able once more to hold up her head before the world with nothing to be ashamed of in her birth and parentage; to feel that she was free to listen to Philip Ormond's vows; above all, to know that she had a mother, and that mother Lady Rosamond—what causes of infinite rejoicing had she here! And yet perhaps at this time sorrow was stronger in her heart than joy. In finding a mother she had lost a father, and the loss moved her at first more deeply than the gain; the allegiance of years was

not to be transferred in a day. For it was in vain she sought comfort in assuring herself that there would be no need to transfer it, that she would never part from him whom she had so long called father, and that all who loved her must for her sake be reconciled to one another. The more she strove to be convinced how certain of fulfilment were her wishes, the more she recognised, though without admitting to herself that she did so, the difficulties that stood in the way of their realisation. And sweet though it was to feel herself the child of Lady Rosamond, she would have preferred to be Gilbert Fleming's still when she pictured him sitting dull and desolate at a lonely hearth. She could not help picturing him thus, in spite of all endeavours to persuade herself that such a fate could not, should not, be for him; and the vision made her sad in the midst of her gladness.

Yes, he had counselled well. It was necessary for her happiness that she should learn not to think of him, or else to think of him only as a memory. And yet how teach herself so hard a lesson knowing that he lived a forlorn outcast in a foreign land? Surely it was not in her to solve the problem thus.

She was roused from her meditations by Josephine, who came with a message from Philip Ormond entreating for an interview. Sir Arthur had long before taken leave, and all the other

visitors had followed his example with the exception of Philip, who, unwilling to go without another sight of her whom he at last knew that he might claim as his, had lingered behind till now.

With fluttering pulses she descended, and entered the homely sitting-room where in the fading daylight her lover awaited her. He rushed forward as she appeared, and caught her hands fervently in his.

"My own love! my very own at last! Oh! my Maud, how can we give thanks enough for this blessing that has been vouchsafed us? We have waited long, but joy has come now—such perfect joy as I never looked for."

She burst into tears; her joy was not perfect yet, for she thought of one she loved who had said he could not share it.

"But we must make him happy too," she faltered out between her sobs. "He is my father always—my beloved father. Oh! promise that you will help me to make him happy."

Very gently, very lovingly, he sought to comfort her when he understood what her trouble was; yet rather by endearing words and caresses than by the assurances she had hoped for. He said much of his love for her, of the pain it gave him to see her in distress, but nothing of the future relations between her and the man she had so long held her father, and whom she still loved as such. Appa-

rently the problem which perplexed her perplexed Philip too, or perhaps he thought Mr. Fleming's solution the best one.

His tenderness was very potent with her, and she soon became somewhat soothed; so that, as she sat beside him listening to words that were to her sweeter than music, she became for a time oblivious of all things save his love and the happiness she found in its possession. At last the darkness gathering around them reminded her of the flight of time, and her thoughts reverted to the solitary invalid upstairs. It was more than an hour since she had parted from him, and she could not be satisfied to let him remain longer alone without at least ascertaining if he had need of her. So she took leave of Philip—not, however, till he had arranged an excuse for seeing her again by volunteering to wait for a report of the patient's health—and made her way up the dark staircase.

It was all but night in Mr. Fleming's chamber as she entered—opening the door very softly lest she should startle him—and the long crimson curtains of the bed on the further side of which she had left him seated looked almost black in an obscurity unrelieved save by the dull glimmer of an expiring fire. All was still when she listened, and she would have retreated without seeking to

disturb him, but that the evening was chilly, and she feared he might suffer if allowed to sit up longer in that well-nigh fireless room.

"Papa," she murmured, "are you awake?"

He was usually a light sleeper, but this time he did not hear her, and no answer came.

"Papa," she repeated, advancing a few steps further into the room. "Dear papa."

But again there was no response.

"Papa, it is getting very late. You have been asleep more than an hour."

Still all was silent—so silent that, with her ears strained to catch the faintest movement, she could hear nothing, not even the sound of his breathing from the other side of the curtained bed.

A strange trembling came over her, and her spirit turned sick and faint. An unaccountable fancy had seized her that he be was not where she had left him, and that she was alone in the room. And yet where could he if not there? Surely he had not set out on his journey in the darkness of the chill autumn evening, and without even waiting to bid her good-bye!

With a wildly palpitating heart she stole round by the foot of the bed, and looked towards the accustomed chair. And then she drew a breath of relief, and was almost ready to smile at her own folly. For the mingled light of the sinking

fire and the darkening evening sky showed her the figure of Mr. Fleming still sitting where she had left him—not quite as he had sat then, but with his arm resting on her work-table, and his face turned towards the stars which gradually multiplied on the western horizon.

"Papa!" she whispered, for she was afraid of rousing him too abruptly from a reverie apparently so profound. "Don't be frightened, dear papa—it is only I, your little Maud."

But he did not stir a muscle.

"Papa, papa!" she cried, a new access of fear seizing her. "Oh! why won't you speak to me?"

He still did not answer, and in growing alarm she went up and touched him on the shoulder.

"Papa!"

He remained immovable as ever. Terrified, she caught at his hand, and as hers closed on it there burst from her lips a wild shriek of anguish and despair.

Gilbert Fleming had departed on his journey after all. Thus was the problem solved.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONSOLATION.

THE effort of that day had been too much for a frame already well-nigh worn out by the ceaseless chafing of an unquiet spirit. The earthly dwelling had become uninhabitable, and the occupant had departed. But the separation between body and soul, if abrupt, had been peaceful and painless; no trace of struggle embittered the tranquillity of the smile into which death had composed the marble features. Gilbert Fleming had been alone in his last moments, yet he had not been unfriended.

But not this assurance, not all the loving sympathy of Philip Ormond and Josephine, had power to soothe the passionate grief of her who was left the dead man's chief mourner. In vain they sought to remind her of the blessings still remaining to her; all her faculties, whether for joy or sorrow, were absorbed in the sense of her bereavement, and she could make no room in her heart for aught

else. It was long before they could even induce her to leave the chamber of death; and when at last they had succeeded in forcing her to descend, they were disappointed by finding that the change had brought no alleviation to the intensity of her suffering.

"I have lost him, I have lost him," was still her cry. "What shall I do? my father is taken from me."

In the violence of her grief she did not hear the sound of carriage-wheels rolling up the street and stopping just in front of the house; nor did she notice a knock which immediately afterwards reverberated at the street-door. Josephine, however, was more observant, and, exchanging a glance of intelligence with Philip Ormond, hastened from the room to answer the summons.

"I have lost him. Father, father! Oh! what will become of me? I have lost my father."

"But your mother is here to comfort you," said a soft voice at her ear—a voice whose well-known tones sent a vibration through her heart as though awakening a sleeping echo.

She started and looked round. At her side stood a slender black-robed figure, with a face fresh and fair, though bearing the impress of sorrow, and eyes mild and dove-like which shone with unfathomable tenderness—the very embodiment

and realisation of the bright ideal which she had formerly been wont to associate with the name of mother. The sight worked upon her like a charm. As though in obedience to an irrepressible instinct, she made a forward movement, and, uttering the single word "Mother," fell into the outstretched arms that awaited her, and pillowed her weary head once more upon the gentle bosom where it had lain in the far-away years of infancy.

Lady Rosamond had that evening arrived with her sister at Ormond Hall. She had not long reached it when Sir Arthur returned from Linchester, bringing with him Nathaniel Digges, whom, with a sense of his own deficiencies in respect of tact, the old man had invited to accompany him that he might assist in breaking the news. Between them, somehow or other—how neither Sir Arthur nor Nathaniel could ever exactly tell—the news was broken; and Lady Rosamond, with a rush of ecstatic joy which for a while was more overwhelming than the sharpest sorrow, learned that her daughter still lived, and was already known to her in the person of the young governess towards whom she had felt so powerfully attracted, and whom she had continued to befriend even when believing her the illegitimate daughter of Gilbert Fleming. On somewhat recovering from the tumult of emotion awakened by tidings of such purport, her irresistible

impulse was to fly to her child; and she set out for Linchester without delay, accompanied by Nathaniel as guide and escort. Sir Arthur would have wished to go also, but the events of the day had already been almost too much for his strength, and he had no choice but to remain behind. His example was reluctantly followed by Lady Blanche, who, between the fatigue of travelling and her delight at the restoration of her niece, was in a semi-hysterical condition which made further exertion for that evening quite out of the question. Perhaps, however, their society would hardly have been so congenial to Lady Rosamond in the present state of her feelings as that of the poor schoolmaster who was her daughter's friend, and who was able to beguile the way with eulogies of that daughter's manifold perfections. Not that she needed to be told of these, her instinct having long ago been ready to invest with all the attributes of excellence the youthful stranger whom she had first known as Nathaniel's *protégée*. Still it was pleasant to her to hear her child's praises spoken, and the schoolmaster's disquisitions on this theme were very efficacious in whiling away the interval which passed between departure from Ormond Hall and arrival at the house where she was about to find the daughter whom she longed to clasp to her heart.

And Nathaniel? what had become of him that he had not entered with his patroness?

He had made a pretext of the lateness of the hour for taking leave of her at the door of the house; he had not felt within him the courage to meet Maud again that day. If he had known that she was in sorrow, it might have been otherwise, for his was not a nature coward-like to shun the presence of grief, but rather to seek it that he might bring comfort. He only knew, however, that every obstacle had that day been removed which had stood in the way of a union between her and Philip Ormond, that in his hearing Philip had claimed her as his betrothed, that in his sight Lady Rosamond had pressed Sir Arthur's hand on learning that Philip was her daughter's lover; and he shrank from hearing or seeing more for the present. So he stole away to Bob's lodgings to tell his nephew the good news and ask for a night's shelter—glad and sorry simultaneously, happy in the happiness of Lady Rosamond and Maud, but happy with an aching heart.

"I shall be better by-and-by," he whispered to himself, as he strode along the dark streets. "I am a weak fool just now—an ungrateful fool, with so many blessings of my own to be thankful for—but I shall grow used to it in time. When they are once—once married, I shall be stronger, strong

enough to bid them joy as heartily as I wish it to them. And then perhaps I shall learn to be once more happy."

And indeed it was probable that he would, for he was not a man to be long sorry when those dear to him were glad.

While the schoolmaster was thus making his lonely way to his nephew's dwelling, Maud—she must be called so to the end—was lying folded to Lady Rosamond's heart, renewing in the tender embrace of her mother a host of dim childish recollections which hitherto, when they had crossed her mind, she believed to have come to her from the world of dreams. She felt now, clasped in those encircling arms, that their pressure was familiar to her; she understood now that not instinct alone, but memory, had drawn her so mysteriously towards the gentle sorrowing lady whom she had met as a stranger, but who was in truth the lost mother for whom her heart pined.

"My child, my child—my little Rosamond."

She knew that those lips had called her Rosamond before; the voice, the name—all were familiar. She looked up, and answered the endearing words with a passionate caress. Yes, this was her mother—her beloved, her adored mother.

But sweet as it was to find herself thus restored to a mother's love, a doubt yet remained to be set

at rest before the healing spell could work with full power.

"Mother, can you forgive him? He prayed for your pardon, and I promised it in your name. Oh! mother, you will keep my promise to the dead?"

The mild eyes into which she gazed fixed themselves steadfastly on hers, and in them shone the light of an all-suffering, all-forgiving charity.

"I will," said Lady Rosamond earnestly. "A weary life mine has been since I lost you, but he has given you back to me, and the past shall be blotted out. I forgive him freely and fully."

Too much moved for words, the daughter clung gratefully to the mother; she knew how much that patient mother had suffered, and her own heart bled in the knowledge. Lady Rosamond seemed to divine something of what her child felt, for she added soothingly:

"Nay, it is over now, and I look to the future to bring me compensation for the sorrow that has been. To see you happy will make me live over again the days when I was young and glad myself. And yonder is one who I think will make my child very happy."

She turned towards Philip as she spoke; it was manifest that she knew of her daughter's choice, and was willing to ratify it. With eager step and rapturous look the young man advanced.

"Lady Rosamond, will you give her to me? I will cherish her as my own soul."

There was no spoken answer, but Maud was conscious that her mother took her hand and placed it in that of Philip, who, receiving it in silent ecstacy, pressed it fervently to his heart.

And then it was that Maud—finding herself restored to the mother after whom she had yearned, with her heart's choice confirmed by that mother's solemn sanction, and humbly believing that he whom she mourned was forgiven in another world as he was forgiven in this—felt a ray of comfort fall upon her spirit. Light had made its way through the dark cloud of sorrow which had but lately looked to her impervious to any gleam of promise; and she understood that in time she might be able to bear the full glow of the sunshine which was behind.

THE END.

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